DEADLANDS:

DARK TALES TO TERRIFY THE SOUL

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DEADLANDS: DARK TALES TO TERRIFY THE SOUL
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FOR MY FAMILY

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

The sun beat down its scorching rays on the darkly clad stranger. He had been walking for seven days and seven nights through the freezing icicles of the dark and the mercilessly burning days, but still his footsteps had not wavered nor his direction erred. He knew precisely where he was going and when he was going to get there. The sun had started to set now and at last began to avert its angry glare away from this tireless stranger.

James stretched out in the cool shade and smiled smugly, unaware of this approaching stranger. He had made good progress that day despite the sweltering heat and now had only about one and a half day's worth of brisk hiking left. Just one and a half days left he contemplated to himself before he had fulfilled his ambition of traversing the legendary American Badlands mountains.

His thoughts took him back home to rainy old Britain. Although a rain sodden land that it was, he longed to feel those cool drops of rain on his head. James had never spared a thought for the notion that he might actually miss being wet, nevertheless it was a thought that he was repeatedly having, a thought that was fast crystallising into an urge.

His heart had longed to bring his fiancée Judith along, but his mind knew better and realised that the journey would have been a harsh pounding on her already delicate and precariously balanced health. Besides she just hadn't understood his need to fulfil this childhood dream of his to wander the Badlands, in fact no one had

fully understood and supported this potentially hazardous venture! There was only one person ,who had given him unwavering support and understanding-himself!

James had long felt a magnetic pull between himself and those towers of the Badlands mountains that had been sculpted by the hands of nature. It was a magnetic pull that he had first felt when he had seen a picture of them in some old dusty geography text book at school, but even that ancient grainy black and white photograph hadn't been able to conceal the mountains startling and unforgiving beauty.

Suddenly James sat bolt upright-he wasn't sure why he had roused himself from his meandering memories, nothing had startled him. He had just felt without warning
an urge (or had it been an actual voice?) inside himself that had prompted him into this seemingly motiveless action.

He scanned the barren landscape that surrounded him. It seemed to him as if it was a barren womb that could never give birth to any young green off-spring. All he could see was the dying moments of the day spread across the terrain and the fast appearing long shadows that were heralding in the steadily approaching night. There was absolutely nothing to be seen or at least nothing to be seen that he hadn't already glanced at, stared at, laid down on or tripped up on at least a thousand times before.

It was then that the stranger made himself known to James by suddenly materialising from the dusky air, (at least that was the

way it seemed to James!). It was as if the stranger had been concealing himself, somehow camouflaged in the endless rock scenery and then had consciously decided to reveal himself to James's eyes.

One question burned in James's fatigued mind. Who was this strangely clad figure who had so skilfully hidden his presence? A figure who was now walking (or was he gliding?), over the stones and rocks that waited so eagerly to trip and snap the unsuspecting foot or ankle. James stared transfixed as the stranger plotted a slow but steady course directly towards him through the stone maze of rocks and boulders.

Out of nowhere a strange breeze gripped the air by the throat, it caressed the rocks and rustled James's clothes as though it was a hand-maiden sweeping the path in front of the approaching stranger, clearing the way of all debris and dust. James felt its icy fingers run across his face, he shivered in response to its cold unloving touch and rubbed his cheek instinctively.

The raging flame of panic started to spread across James's brain, down his spine and into his legs igniting them like two sticks of dynamite. He felt that they wanted to explode with movement that would take him far away from where he stood and from the forbidding rendezvous with this approaching stranger. It did not take long though for James to extinguish this fiery flame with self-loathing for feeling it in the first place. 'After all what could possibly happen to him out here?' he thought to himself. 'Anything you bloody fool!'-his fear screamed back.

James's normally logical mind became clouded with the ancient survival instinct. He looked desperately about for something to protect himself with-a stick perhaps? No! No good all the sticks looked pathetically dry and brittle. Perhaps he could use a rock then? At least they were in abundance- but what size? A boulder was absurdly large, he needed a rock that he could hold in one hand there had to be- James halted himself in mid-thought shocked at what he was thinking. He was supposed to be a civilised man yet here he was thinking the most primitive of thoughts and contemplating the most murderous of actions! Maybe that was what being in a wilderness did to a man- made him less human and more like the predatory wildlife that surrounded him.

James blinked and then saw that the stranger was now less than a stone's throw away! His startled mind tried to comprehend how the stranger could have covered such a long distance in the blink of an eye! It was as if time had speeded up when he had closed his eyelids- but that was impossible! Surely he must have grossly misjudged the original distance of the stranger in the first place!

James felt the natural reflex movement to blink again but resisted the urge. He felt that he dare not take his eyes of this stranger for one millisecond, even though his eyeballs were crying out in pain as more and more dust particles collected on them. He tried to hold this pain in check but it grew steadily till James had no choice but to give into the agony by closing his eyelids.

James was almost too scared to open them again for fear of what he might see, but open them he did -which only served to confirm

his worse fear! The stranger was now no more than a few yards away from him! There was no time for him to find something to protect himself and nowhere for him to flee and hide - there was only one avenue of escape open to him.

James hesitantly raised his hands for a warm handshake and spoke the first words that came into his head.

"Hi! Certainly hot today wasn't it?" He forced out of his parched mouth.

It seemed as polite a way as any to begin any normal conversation, but James could tell this was to be no ordinary conversation!

As soon as the words had left his mouth he wished he had been able to reach out into the air and grab them back having totally regretted starting this particular conversation in such a bland and unoriginal manner! But fear had now temporarily blunted his usually sharp skills as the conversationalist who had always been able to put people at their ease.

While he had spoken those first few words James could hear them slowly drifting down the rocky slopes in the form of a distant echo. It was as if time itself had now changed its mind and was slowing down now to a gradual halt, likewise the stranger also slowed down and came to a halt a step away from James totally oblivious to his outstretched hand.

In the darkening evening James strained his eyes trying to pick

out any discernible features on the stranger's face that would at least reassure him that he was indeed human. Unfortunately most of his face was blanketed in some thick dark cloth that gave no clue to any of his features. Though in the dying light, James could pick out two dark piercing specks on the stranger's face that were obviously his eyes. A while back James had heard a saying that the eyes were the windows of the soul, going on that this stranger's soul was a deep black void filled to the brim with darkness.

As suddenly as his appearance one of the stranger's bony hands darted into his layers of clothing. James could see the outline of the skin-taut hand burrowing deep under the cloth causing it to ripple as if it was a dark ocean. He watched with increasing shock as the bone-etched hand feverishly dug deeper and deeper. It was as though it was under the stranger's own skin and was digging into his flesh rather than presumably searching for something under his clothing.

At that moment the encrusted skin hand leapt out from under his clothing as if it was gasping for air. In its grasp it triumphantly held a rectangular object hidden by the shadows of the late evening. The stranger took a step forward and the dying rays of the sun solved the mystery -it was just a book! A little ancient looking but still just a plain ordinary book.

Deep inside his mind James breathed a huge sigh of relief. He had no idea what to have expected from this stranger, his expectations had not been high to say the least. It was one of his fundamental faults to expect the worse of people, but then

experience had taught him many a lesson in the sorry state of human nature.

The stranger still held the book in his direction obviously wanting and waiting for him to take it. Words of wisdom given to James by his parents suddenly sprang into his mind "Never accept sweets from strangers!". James immediately rejected this childhood advice though, after all he was an adult now and as for strangers -well hadn't he heard a quote from some long dead philosopher -'A stranger is just a friend that you haven't met yet!' Though on the other hand that same philosopher had died a sudden and violent death -perhaps by the hands of one of those strangers who he had supposed was a friend. James reflected darkly on this final point but realised that the bottom line was that he didn't wish to do anything that might cause offence to this stranger, an offence that could in extreme circumstances bring about a deadly conclusion to this encounter.

Smiling broadly James reached out and plucked the book from the stranger's grasp. At which point the stranger's eyes almost disappeared under an avalanche of wrinkles as if his face had just cracked open into a wide smile.

"Thank you!" James mouthed slowly and excessively extenuating. He scolded himself for being so ignorant. It was wrong to jump to the conclusion that the stranger was deaf or mute just because he hadn't spoken, and even if he was it would be ignorant and stupid of him to treat this stranger like an idiot who needed to be treated like a child and have every word slowly mouthed to him with extra care.

"Thank you" James repeated this time in a much improved and natural manner.

"My name is James Lawrence -pleased to meet you!" he continued.

James extended his hand again to give a firm handshake but the stranger just stood there, the area around his eyes still a mass of wrinkles and endlessly deep crevices. An eternity of embarrassment seemed to pass while the stranger stood like a lump of rock without returning the handshake. Suddenly it dawned on James that the stranger was a lump of rock! James blinked in shock and astonishment not wanting to believe what his eyes were clearly telling him. He looked down to what he had thought was a hand only to see a mound of stone worn smooth with time. James staggered back, his eyes refusing to avert their stare away from the impossible episode that had occurred.

'Just an hallucination bought on by the tiredness and heat' he consoled himself in desperation some how hoping that he might believe in that unlikely explanation. Not daring to look back he scrambled back to his campsite well away from the human-shaped rock, sat down and looked down at his shaking hands to notice that he was still holding onto the book with a vice-like grip as if his life depended on it!

But whatever was contained in those parched papers no longer mattered to him! He had no intention of revealing its secrets to himself and threw the book down open on the ground where it

bounced off a rock and sprang open.

James bent down to pick it up when his eyes caught a certain word -Thomas- James was slightly intrigued -he had once known a person called Thomas who had been a work colleague a while back. He wondered if there were any parallels between this Thomas and the Thomas that he had known , his curiosity made him forget the promise that he had made to himself and he sat down his mind fully drawn into the stories that were to unfold before his eyes.

DOUBTING THOMAS

"My parents are aliens! or at least not human - well really I don't know what they are exactly! They're just not a part of me and I'm certainly not a part of them!"

Thomas wrote these words carefully in his diary. Occasionally throwing a glance over his shoulders in case his studious entry was interrupted or overseen.

"I have to be careful what I think when I'm close to them 'cos I think that they can read my mind" He scribbled frantically.

Thomas didn't know exactly when his doubts about his parents had first floated to the surface the only thing he had been sure of was that his doubts had been real and not imagined. Perhaps they had started as soon as he had been brought into this world , when his uncluttered young mind had been blessed with the sixth sense that all children seem to have before the trauma and complexities of the world steal them away.

He could remember with such amazing rich clarity the first time that he had been held by his mother. She had stared into his eyes and his eyes had returned the greeting. She would have seen a bouncing innocent infant but he had seen something unearthly and unnatural, a piece of something that just didn't fit into the giant Jigsaw of life.

He had often wondered what a shame it was that his lack of experience with the world at that age had not equipped with the

necessary vocabulary to describe what he had seen behind those eyes. Though now he was equipped to put a word to what he had seen and that word was-EVIL!

Sudden footsteps near his door startled Thomas from his writing labours. By the sound of them Thomas could tell that they belonged to his mother or at least to the person who he called mother and who called herself mother.

Thomas held his breath in nervous anticipation at what could happen next. The foot took a step closer to his door which put Thomas immediately into his 'emergency response' procedure, he bounced silently into bed, slid the diary under his pillow and quietly buried himself under the numerous bed sheets, till only his untidy mop of hair showed above the top of the covers.

Thomas's door creaked open and a female form crept in, although his body was as still and as silent as stone his mind was a hive of messages, observations and reactions to those footsteps which gently made their way to him . Until finally he could feel her warm breath rustling through his hair and he knew then that she was near and getting nearer all the time.

He gripped the bed rigid with terror as he decided whether to fight or flee but such ideas were ridiculous for he had nowhere to flee and nothing to fight with. He knew that she must be bending directly over him at this very second and just a second away from - at that moment he felt it- A kiss on the side of his head ! He shuddered in revulsion.
It was a kiss that was not warm but cold, not dry but slimy! The

female form he called mother crept back out of the room having delivered her obligatory good night kiss followed shortly by the reassuring click of his bedroom door closing.

Thomas's mother - Mrs Emily Hadley went downstairs to join her husband for a late supper.

"I do worry about Thomas dear" she remarked worriedly. "He's not like other children for his age!"

"You always worry about Thomas and he's never been like other children no matter what age he's been!" Mr Hadley complained gruffly and while doing so not even bothering to raise his eyebrows from the FT that had stolen his attention. Share prices were down again, the country was on the brink of recession and to top it all here he was being bombarded with possible mental signs in his son.

"I just don't know what we're going to do!" Mrs Hadley continued.

Mr Hadley decided to adapt a rather appropriate phrase for the present situation that he had used several times at work to avoid the avalanche of blame from any mishap. "Our son's upbringing is your department not mine dear!" He retorted smugly.

"He's your child as well not just mine Joss!" Mrs Hadley raged. Joss heaved a deep sigh of resignation, to continue with his present attitude would have only served to fan the flames of her anger. What a pity his home wasn't more like life at work things would be so much simpler! Joss lowered his newspaper, folded it

neatly and placed it to one side then addressing Emily in a calm manner said
"What exactly appears to be the problem Emily"

"He just seems so cold and so distant from all of us!" She replied exasperated.

"I dare say that I was the same at his age -You've got to stop mothering the boy and give him room to grow-not pretend that you're a 24 hour safety net for him to fall into if ever he's in trouble!" Joss advised wisely.

"I know I do try to spoil him !" Emily admitted. "But its hard not to he is my baby after all!

"Overgrown baby more like!" Joss chuckled.

"Its as if he thinks that we're not human!" Emily lamented.

Joss looked up astounded! "Rubbish! What makes you think that?"

"That cold look he sometimes gives me!" Emily confided. "It sends shivers down my spine and back up again!"

Joss laughed at his wife's fear. "Its all down to those comic books that you keep allowing him to buy! They've filled his head with nonsense!"

"I'm serious Joss I think we should both have a talk with him!"

Emily continued.

"What do you mean? Ask him 'Son do you think that your mother and I are ETs?' He would never take us seriously again. Let's forget it Emily!" Joss pleaded.

Emily shook her head disappointedly, that was one of the several problems with her husband he never seemed to take his responsibilities seriously .

"I'm not going to forget it!" She exclaimed. "Promise me Joss that we'll both have a short chat with him in the morning! Please!"

Joss looked into his wife's pleading eyes and knew that he couldn't refuse her.
'Oh well anything for a quiet life!' he thought to himself.

"Of course dear!" He agreed. "Anything to make you feel better!"

The new day entered Thomas's life like a beckoning mystery begging to be explored, he had for the time being at least put behind him the nightmarish doubts about his parents and was determined to enjoy all that the day had to offer.

Thomas bounced down the stairs to find himself confronted by his mother and father standing side by side. Thomas stopped dead in his tracks.

"Thomas" his mother began as she edged forward "Your father and I have to talk to you."

"Y-y-yes mother" Thomas found himself stammering as if he was a nervous little boy lost in a crowd.

"Your mother" Joss started to state at which point Emily gave him a sharp dig in his ribs with her elbow.

"What I mean is that we're both worried about you son" Joss started again after casting Emily an angry glance.

"Is there anything the matter Thomas?" Emily interrupted.

"Anything that you want to talk to us about son?" Joss chipped in.

Thomas felt uneasy and suspicious as both his parents moved forward and he retreated back but in doing so knocking over an expensive glass ornament that shattered into a thousand tiny fragments, Thomas's self-control shattered along with that glass. "KEEP AWAY!" He barked madly at them

"Its just us Thomas your parents!" Joss began. "What are you afraid of?"
"I'M AFRAID OF BOTH OF YOU!" Thomas screamed in complete hysteria. "YOU'RE NOT MY PARENTS AND I'M NOT YOUR SON!"

Thomas felt relieved that he had unloaded his mind of such a secret anxiety-but it was a short lived relief as he saw the look on his parents faces who obviously thought that he was out of his mind.

It seemed that the few moments that passed lasted an eternity but the void of silence was finally broken when his tear stained mother finally spoke in disbelief.
"What did you just say to us Thomas?"

"You're not who you say you are!" Thomas stated bluntly

"After all we do for you how can you say such hateful things against us? Look what you're doing to your mother!" exclaimed Thomas's dad.

Although in shock Emily threw her arms round Thomas "Oh Thomas we love you don't you know that?"

"Well I don't love either of you. I hate you both!" Thomas stated coldly.

"Oh No Thomas please!" his mother begged.

"I want to know where my real parents are and what you've done with them!" ordered Thomas.

"But we are your real parents Thomas!" Emily pleaded with him.

"No you're not ! I'll never believe you and I'll always hate you!" Thomas reiterated ruthlessly.

"You don't mean that! You can't mean that!" Emily wailed.

"I do! I do! I do!" he continued pitilessly.

"Oh Thomas!" sighed Emily resignedly, tears trickling down her cheeks like tiny streams.

There was nothing else to be said . Thomas tried to wriggle free from his mother's uncomfortable embrace but for some reason couldn't. He glanced down and screamed a million thousand screams at the sight that met his eyes. His mother's hands and arms were no longer round his waist these now dangled down from her like large grotesque loose sausage skins and from her elbow he could see a black tentacle slithering endlessly out, which was stretching out around him like a boa-constrictor slowly crushing the life out of him.

He gathered up the remainder of his breath to let out a heart-stopping cry for help but before he could another tentacle thrust itself into his gaping mouth. The other tentacle had by now completed its winding track round his chest and now attacked his last avenue of air-his nose. The tip of the tentacle split into 2 prongs of slimy flesh each one thrusting up each of his nostrils till Thomas could feel them rubbing against his brain.

"If only you hadn't said what you said !" Emily's voice echoed through Thomas's mind.

"If only you hadn't said what you said!" Joss's voice joined in repeating Emily's regret.

As the last tiny breath of life was being forced out of his pain-

racked frame he thought that he could hear a lullaby which use to be sang to him as a baby, while further in the background he could hear Joss consoling his wife. "Don't worry dearest we can start again elsewhere , we'll make a better job of it this time I promise. There will always be another mother and father in this part of the solar system willing to sell their baby to us if the price is right...

Thomas didn't hear any more, the pain became too much for him to devote the small amount of energy that he had to that sense. The only thing left for him to do was feel the pain of his mother's embrace as it sent him into the darkness of oblivion.

ONE-WAY TRIP

"I'll raise yer 50!" Vic smirked knowingly as he casually threw another crisp £50 note at the rapidly growing mountain of cash. He looked down dismissingly on his other opponents in this game of high stakes poker. What a pathetic bunch they were! Just begging to have their wallets made lighter and serve them right! He told himself.

He was making a killing out of being a card sharp , though in some unkind circles he would have rudely been called a card cheat. Either way it didn't matter just as long as it brought the money rolling in! He felt that he could write a dictionary entitled the A-Z on 'How to cheat at Cards' then follow it up with encyclopaedic volumes on the same subject stretching from A-Z, each volume devoted to one letter of the alphabet!

As far as he was concerned he not only knew every trick in the book he was the one who had written the damn thing! What he didn't know about cards wasn't worth knowing and a lot of what he did know wasn't known by anyone else!

Vic continued to survey what he concluded was pathetic competition- all of them losers hoping to get rich quick in some scheme that they would never ever find. That was their weakness, thinking that their dreams could be made into reality. It was a weakness that Vic like a vulture was all too ready to swoop down and prey upon.

Opposite him was Johnny a spoilt rich kid just out of puberty but

not yet fully into manhood with acne to prove it. He was as impatient as he was experienced.-easy meat! Meanwhile next to Johnny sat Grant -old, wrinkled, slow and a boozer-even easier meat!

Vic felt like a king at court and in his presence were the Jack and the Joker all there to serve him and do his bidding. 'They're as helpless as the cards in my hand!' laughed Vic to himself.

For once he had not had to employ any of his card sharp skills instead Lady Luck had smiled down on him and blessed him with a perfect no-lose hand. He stared hypnotised at the surrounding untidy heap of people which could bring his own dreams into the realms of reality. Each time he looked at this pile of human failure all he could see was a forth new car- this time a Rolls-Royce with a personalised registration or a third house- this time a villa in Spain.

As he stared round the table he could see the word loser written across their foreheads, such people had been put on this earth for his use to live off just like a parasite. After all money made the world go round and it was people like him who did just that! Redistributing the wealth of the world and encouraging spending booms! He was so unlike those dreamers who just scrimped , scraped and hoarded any pennies that they had in the hope of multiplying it a hundred fold in some pie in the sky scheme -such as in this poker game!

"Well Boozer you in or out?" Vic chirpily addressed Grant. He knew that this would anger him and disrupt his judgement.
"Shut your 'ole I'm thinking !" Grant growled back.
"Well while you're at it let me nip out and get my sleeping bag!" Vic goaded Grant.

"Don't push it you smug bastard ! I'm gonna match you!" Grant barked furiously as he dug deeply into one of his moth-bitten pockets and produced 5 crumpled £10 notes stained with beer splashes and reeking of whisky.

This only prompted Vic to continue unabashed in his merciless ribbing "Bloody Hell I don't need to go the pub ever again! I just need to catch a whiff of that dosh to get me pissed!"

"What's it to you? Its still bloody cash ain't it?" demanded Grant.

Vic smirked conceitedly and turned his attention to Johnny. "How about you Johnny? You man enough to keep up?" He taunted.

"More than man enough to keep up with motor-mouth!" Johnny retorted as he carefully placed a crisp £50 note with the others.

'All bravado and front! I bet he's quaking like a little leaf underneath!' Vic surmised to himself .

"Right boys show me what you've got !" Vic ordered as he confidently spread out his perfect hand. Grant took one look at them and threw down his cards in disgust. "I'm out you lucky bastard!" he grumbled.

Vic turned to Johnny provoking him further "How about you Johnny? Are you man enough to match me now or do you have to fold like a little boy?"
But Johnny said nothing and did nothing instead he just stared at Vic. "Well what's the matter with yer cat got yer tongue little boy?" Vic continued . But Johnny continued to keep his cards upheld and instead uttered "You're a flipping cheat Vic and you're not getting a bloody penny!"

"Don't try to blame me for the fact that you can't play poker to save your pissing life!" Vic exploded. "Now if you've got a better hand take the bloody cash its all yours if not piss off and better luck next time!"

Vic immediately decided to get out as quickly as possible as things were rapidly turning nasty. He hastily shoved the waiting wads of cash into his eagerly waiting pockets while Johnny stared transfixed at the quickly vanishing pile of cash. Grant was pass caring and had found solace in a bottle of whisky which he was swigging in large gulpfuls.

The cash now safely in his pockets Vic stood up to make his quick getaway, he allowed himself an ironic smile over the fact of being accused of cheating when in fact this had been one of the few occasions when he had not had to resort to such base tricks , it was really quite-

"Give it back Vic!" Johnny screamed interrupting Vic's thoughts. "Are you flipping joking or what?" Vic replied astounded at this young up-start's bare faced cheek.

"Do I look as if I'm joking you bloody cheat?" Johnny stated grimly. Vic could see that he was not ! Vic glanced hopefully at Grant for support, but what help could he expect from a man who had just lost thousands to him, besides he had passed out and lay sprawled in an untidy heap on the dirty warehouse floor.

In a second Vic had mentally checked out the nearest escape route and calculated how long it would take for him to get out before Johnny could make any attempt to stop him. The best way out was the way he had come in- through the front door.
"Don't do anything rash!" warned Vic. "Or I'll see that you're banned from every high stakes card game in London!"

"I ain't intending on doing anything rash!" Johnny stated coldly.

"That's good Johnny , that's real good, glad to see you're using your head!" Vic agreed nervously as he edged away slowly towards the door still under the watchful glare of Johnny's beady eyes. He was within arms reach of the door handle now and reached out towards it certain of his escape. He turned and opened the door- at that moment all that was floating through his mind was what he had in store for his easily earned winnings. Perhaps if he hadn't been so wrapped up in his own dreams he would have heard Johnny finish his statement. "I ain't gonna do anything rash Vic ‘cos I've thought of doing this for a long time." But Vic's mind was too far away to catch those fateful words.

If he had stayed his usual alert self he might have seen Johnny take out his dad's Wembley revolver and aim it cold bloodedly at him, he might even have heard Johnny taking the safety catch off and cocking the trigger. But Vic heard and saw none of this, the only thing that Vic heard was the thunderclap of the gun followed by the sharp jab of the bullet in his side.

Vic didn't have time to turn around or the luxury of being able to collapse in pain he only had time to save himself and throw himself through the door into the unlit dark street.

He staggered into the shadows and waited for his pursuer to come and finish the job that he had started, but no one came . Vic realised that Johnny must have lost his nerve , he must have expected just one shot to be enough to finish him but he was tougher than Johnny realised. Chances being the gutless bastard was even now looking for somewhere to hide and lay low for a while. Except that no matter how long he laid low for as soon as he raised his bloody head he would be waiting with a great big ruddy axe to chop it off with! Revenge was a dish best served cold and Vic was intending to enjoy every morsel of it!

He surveyed the traffic dead street and kicked himself for having chosen such a dead back water in which to hold the poker game. He had come my minicab and had expected to have been able to ring for one to collect him but that was of course out of the question now especially as in all the panic he had left his mobile phone back in the warehouse.

If only he could find just one car to stop , he had more than enough cash to bribe the lucky driver into being a minicab driver for half an hour and getting him to the hospital before he bled to death! But the overwhelming problem that faced him at the moment was finding that elusive car in the first place. There was no public telephone box and he was surrounded by decaying empty industrial buildings. Though the one thing in his favour was time, as the frosty air had helped numb the pain from his flesh wound as well as helping to stop the bleeding.

He consoled himself with the thought that he would not have go in for another shady poker game ever again, the £100,000 plus that he had on him along with his previous winnings would be enough to last an average man several lifetimes. He should have got out years ago rather than wait for this to happen!

Lady Luck smiled on Vic again that night as he suddenly heard a noise that was like music to his ears -it was the sound of an engine! He looked about frantically but couldn't catch sight of it as if the darkness had buried it. Suddenly he caught sight of 2 round eyes their bright glare piercing through the blackness and realised that they were headlights. He strode into the middle of the road and waved his hands back and forth -no way could he afford to let this lifeline of hope pass him by!

The vehicle slowed and Vic rushed over to the driver.

"Thank God I ran into you pal! I need someone -anyone to get me to the hospital quick it doesn't matter if you ain't a cab driver I've got enough cash to make it worth your while!" Vic blurted out.

"This is a bloody cab pal! Are you blind or what?" The cab driver rudely replied.
Vic looked at the vehicle and realised that it was a black cab! He was so relieved that he decided to let the cabby's rudeness go orally unpunished.

Vic heaved himself gently into the cab.

"Come on geezer I ain't got all night !" The cabby complained viciously.

"OK OK pal I'm in!" Vic said compliantly, but deep inside he comforted himself with the fact that the cabby had lost out on the big tip that he had intended to give him.

Vic planted himself down heavily and rested back on the comfortable black leather seat, the inside of the cab was pleasantly warm and inviting.

"Where to?" demanded the cabby.

Vic was astounded! Was this guy just plain thick or deaf? Hadn't he already told him that he had to get to the hospital?

"The hospital pal!" he replied curtly.

"Yeah but which one?" the cabby enquired further.

'Which one?' exclaimed Vic to himself , was this bloody cabby

taking the piss or what? Vic could no longer control the anger in him that detonated like a time bomb.

"The bloody nearest one of course!" he exploded.
"Hoi!" the cabby turned round his face flashing with anger. "Do you want a cab or not ? 'Cos if you do show a little bloody respect right? Or else you can get out right now and walk to the nearest bloody hospital yourself! Got it?"

Vic had to silently count to 3 before he felt that his rage was fully under lock and key. He could have shown the cabby his blood soaked side which at the moment was well hidden under his thick overcoat, but to do so could be inviting trouble. Either the cabby would chuck him out in case he got into trouble with the old bill for being a possible accessory to some unknown heinous crime, or more likely he would inform on him when they got to the hospital (after he had paid his fare of course!)
Vic's plan was to get to the hospital, give a false name and address get quickly patched up and be out before the coppers knew a damn thing and were able to throw him in the nick for illegal gambling!

"Well? You gonna show some respect or what?" demanded the cabby who was still waiting for a reply. Vic nodded silently while biting his lip, so much that it almost bled.

"That's better !" the cabby replied triumphantly and turned back round in order to drive off. Vic breathed a sigh of relief- they were on their way at last! He looked down at his wound and swore a million times inside, the warmth in the taxi had encouraged the

wound in his side to start bleeding again and with the bleeding the numb throbbing that he had been experiencing before had been transformed into an agonised pounding.

He stared outside at his surroundings to try to take his mind off the pain and couldn't believe his eyes! He strained forward to get a look at the cabby's dashboard that only confirmed his fears. The speedometer needle was barely off the 10mph mark -they were going at a snail slow pace!!

Vic rapped desperately on the glass dividing screen in the cab. The cabby immediately stopped the cab and swung round.

"Yeah?" he spat out vehemently.

Vic refused to believe what he was seeing and hearing! All cabbies that he had used before were able to hold a decent conversation while driving but not this one ! So now instead of going at a measly 10mph they weren't going at all!

"Look pal" Vic spoke in a controlled manner. "I would really appreciate it if you could really step on it I gotta get to the hospital as soon as -"

"I'm the bloody driver here not you so why don't you let me do the bloody driving! Unless you think that you can do better in these bloody unlit streets." bellowed the cabby angrily.

Vic was tempted to say he could but the pain in his wound was almost overwhelming and all he could do was stay silent and

continue to place his life in this cabby's incompetent hands.

"If it makes you feel any better pal we'll be at the nearest hospital in less than 5 minutes!" the cabby continued.

"Great! That's just great Cabby thanks!" Vic replied gratefully.

'5 minutes!' thought Vic .He could hold on for another 5 minutes easily ,5 minutes was no time at all!

The cab gently nosed its way through the lonely roads , meandering through the maze of back roads , till finally they arrived.

"Right here we are pal the hospital's just across the road. You gonna be OK?" the cabby asked, for the first time expressing concern.

Vic could just glimpse the hospital's front lights. "Yeah I'll be fine from here. Could you wait for me? I shouldn't be all that long." replied Vic "How much do I owe you anyway?"

"Don't worry pal you look as if you've got an honest face we'll settle up when I get you home" reassured the cabby .

Vic almost started howling with laughter at the cabby when he heard that last remark about his face. He had a good mind to leave him waiting while he rang for another hopefully more professional and politer cabby from the hospital after they had patched him up. "Thanks pal! I'll be right back!" Vic cheerfully replied.

"Yeah I know you'll be right back!" the cabby predicted.

Vic paused uneasily for a second , it wasn't what the cabby had said that worried him it was the way that he had said it that had unsettled him . It was as if what the cabby had said was an absolute certainty which could not be deviated from.

Vic threw this worry out of his mind and walked painfully across the road. He was so wrapped up in dealing with his pain that the awful truth didn't dawn on him till he got to the hospital gates- they were bloody padlocked! The hospital had closed down and all that was left was a derelict dead building. The lights that he had seen in the windows had just been the reflection from the moon playing cruel tricks on him.
Vic let out a howl of anguish and pain. He turned utterly enraged towards the cab even from where he was he could see the cabby's face a big wide smirk spread across it!

"BASTARD!" yelled Vic as he ran as best as he could to the cab. He got there surprisingly quickly helped no doubt by the fury he felt that had killed off his pain and that now wanted to kill off that cabby!

"What's the matter pal?" the cabby asked innocently. "You said that you wanted the nearest hospital and this is it -St Swithins."

Vic was in no mood to listen to the cabby's stupid reason and immediately rounded on him. "Listen to me you bastard 'cos I'm gonna say this only once. I'm bloody bleeding to death and if I

don't get to a bloody hospital that is still bloody open I'm gonna bloody well die. So how about putting your bloody foot down on that accelerator and getting me to a bloody hospital, like bloody now!!" with that Vic barged into the cab, gave the cab door a colossal slam and sat bolt upright in the seat rigid with rage.

Vic had expected any number of responses from the cabby but he hadn't bargained on the reply that he got next!

"You don't need a hospital pal!" the cabby stated blandly.

Vic was struck dumb for a moment by the cabby's crass stupidity and ignorance before firing back " Don't I? Then what yer call this a tiny scratch?" Vic tore open his coat to reveal his profusely bleeding wound, but the cabby took one casual glance and repeated his inflammatory statement.

"You don't need a hospital pal!"

"And why bloody not?" yelled Vic.

" ‘Cos you're already dead!" the cabby stated coldly.

"I'm what?" exclaimed Vic.

"You never made it out that warehouse door Vic, that bullet Johnny fired entered your right rib cage travelled through both your lungs before flying out through your left rib cage . Your punctured lungs filled with blood and you drowned in your own fluid. You're dead pal you just don't know it!" explained the

cabby.

Vic sat disbelieving through all of this it couldn't be true but yet it seemed horribly true-but wait! He still had all that cash surely that would prove that he wasn't some wandering disembodied spirit. His hands dived down deeply into his pockets and found ...nothing!

"NOOOOOO!" cried out Vic.

"What's the matter pal ain't you got any money for the fare?" taunted the cabby "Haven't you heard the saying about dead people like you and money -'You can't take it with yer!'" his voice cackled with laughter at his own words. "At least not where we're going" he rattled on.

"Take it where ? Where are we going ?" Vic's voice was suddenly full of dread.

"Oh I think you know the answer to that Vic you're just too scared to believe it, by the way here's the cost of the trip you'll be able to settle up real soon!" The cabby spun the meter round and in bright red letters glowed the words-VIC'S SOUL.

Vic gasped in terror and made a grab for the door but it of course didn't budge.

"No escaping this time pal!" laughed the cabby. "You're on a one way trip to hell and all the money in the world can't save yer!" Vic pressed his face against one of the car door windows and let

out a scream for help that would last for an eternity.

No one came to his rescue of course and no one saw the fiery tunnel that suddenly opened up out of nowhere and swallowed up the cab and its 2 occupants, a condemned soul and the cab driver from hell. After the tunnel had closed up and disappeared into the night and the air became still and cold again, a few blood-stained playing cards could be seen scattered sparsely in the street- the only evidence of a wasted life.

CHRISTMAS DAY SURPRISE

Its Christmas eve and I'm excited because my mummy's coming home tomorrow! Although I'm only 5 my Daddy says that I'm very very strong for my age and as big and tall as other boys twice my age.

I love my mummy and I miss her. She's been very sick in hospital for weeks while my new baby sister was growing in her tummy, - she has been in a coma -at least that's what daddy says she's been in. I'm not sure what it means, I think it's something to do with having your hair combed but I don't understand why that should make her sick! Daddy said that mummy had been very lucky not to meet the angels in heaven. But if angels are good why should mummy be lucky not to meet them? Heaven is supposed to be a very nice place as well. One day I hope to save up and go there on holiday for 2 weeks on my own but if mummy or daddy get worried that I might stay up past my bedtime there then I could go on a day trip instead!

Because of the problem with having her hair combed my poor mummy has not been able to see my lovely baby sister since she gave birth to her while in a coma. But now Daddy says that her coma thingy is gone now and that she'll be coming home for Christmas Day.

Its Christmas Eve and I am in my bed worrying about mummy. I wish I had a present for my mummy but I do not know what to get her. Daddy says not to worry because just to see us all will be the best present she could wish for, but I still wish that I had a present for her. I wonder what is the best present in the whole-

wide world that she could wish for? Suddenly I know what it is!

I quickly ease myself out of bed and slip my feet into the special slippers which daddy bought me and gently pad over to my sleeping sister that I love loads and loads.
I know what I'll do! I'll put her under the tree for my mummy!

My sister looks so peaceful and still sleeping there in her bed just like nan did when she was lying in her open-top box in church last month. I strain my hands over the edge of the cot's bars and carefully heave her out, she recognises me and while smiling gives a playful gurgle.

Holding my sister close to me I stagger from side to side across the room the same way that daddy does when he drinks that strange smelling liquid from those coloured bottles.

Suddenly I slip and loose my balance and my sister and me go crashing onto the cold hard floor. I hope that daddy didn't hear us but my baby sister starts to cry because she's banged her head on the floor! If she doesn't stop she'll ruin everything. I try to gently rock her back to sleep, but she will just not quiet down like a good little sister and go back to sleep.

I can hear the sound of the bedsprings from daddy's room, he must have been woken up by my noisy sister. I can hear shuffling now he must have gotten up from bed and be walking across the room now. I must shut my sister up or she'll ruin my plan. I quickly grab one of her socks and stuff it quickly into her wailing mouth-that's much better all I can hear now is just a very muffled sound. The

shuffling from daddy's room stops and I hear his bedsprings again. Good!

I decide its best to keep the sock in my sister's mouth even though it does smell a bit, after all better safe than sorry is what my mummy and daddy always tell me!

All my little sister is doing now is just waving her little arms about but that doesn't make any noise so that's alright!

I reach up and grab my bedroom door handle forcing it down with all my might, there is a loud click and the door eases open. Its very dark in the landing but I can't switch the light on or daddy will realise that something is going on! Using one hand I carefully feel my way along the landing wall to the top of the stairs. As I go down into the darkness I hear a curious noise as if something is being hit against the banisters but down below I can now see the Christmas tree in the lounge flashing away like a lighthouse beacon , showing me the way to go!

It is then that I notice something sticky and wet on my hands, in the darkness I can't tell what it is but it smells funny and is coming from my baby sister, maybe she has wet herself! Bad little girl!

I take each step slowly one at a time careful not to slip and hurt my little baby sister who has now thankfully stopped waving her arms about and is nice and still.

I take each step one at a time and am careful not to drop my baby

sister again. Finally I get to the bottom and make my way over to the synthetic Christmas tree with the bright flashing lights. Its a pity that many of them are not working , but daddy hasn't had the time to replace them. As I get near the tree I notice how cold my little sister feels, never mind, the remaining bright Christmas lights will warm her up. I place her gently under the tree amongst the sparse collection of other presents. I go to the kitchen and wash off the red stuff that is on my hands-(what funny coloured wee-wee!) and bring back some nice gold-coloured wrapping paper , sellotape and scissors with me. When I get back she hasn’t even moved an inch! Good little girl!

Carefully ,very carefully I wrap up her cold little body in the wrapping paper loosely making sure that I leave a small hole in it for her to breath. I scribble 'TO MUM' on it and stand back looking proudly at the neatly wrapped present that is my little baby sister. I go back upstairs happy with what I've done for my mummy. Its almost morning and my mummy will be home soon . What a surprise she will get when she opens her present, Christmas Day is going to be such a wonderful day!

AN E-MAIL WITH LOVE

Grimacing with the effort Mark swallowed a couple of aspirin to combat the sudden headache and dizziness that he felt due to his never ending and overwhelming workload . He stared blankly at the computer monitor and waited expectantly. Suddenly the screen sprang to life with the signal that an E-mail was incoming.

"I love you baby!" the E-mail read. Mark smiled knowingly, these were the words that he had been waiting all night for and now here they were in front of him in glowing letters draped across his blue computer screen like a string of pearls. It made him feel good deep inside and gave him the kind of feeling that only the unconditional love of a dream woman could give. He stared at his constrictive surroundings and instantly felt the stark contrast of oppressing emotion which that induced in comparison to the trance-like tranquillity transmitted by the deep blue ocean coloured screen of his computer monitor screen.

He felt like as if he was trapped in a goldfish bowl all of his needs provided for but none of his wants. Mark supposed that he should feel honoured and privileged for being part of the A1 category of research scientists who had been recruited to work on a top secret government project, so secret that not one scientist knew totally what the project was about, instead each one was working separately and had each been given their own objective to achieve.

Unfortunately such precautions had not led to the project being as secret as the government would have wished and it had attracted unwanted attention from certain foreign powers eager to either destroy or steal the research accomplished. He had heard rumours

that 2 other scientists working on the project had died in mysterious circumstances one had supposedly committed suicide while the other one had died under the wheels of a lorry. This of course explained his present prison-like conditions but even prisoners had more freedom than he did he reflected sadly. He wasn't even able to have visitors and his communication with the outside world had been reduced to conversing on the net via E-mail. A rather remote and removed way to speak to his girlfriend but it was the only way they had of keeping the embers of their love alive, embers that he could feel were dying slowly in the frosty reality of his surroundings.

Mark contemplated that the person who had ever said distance makes the heart grow fonder must have been blindly in love and divorced from reality!

All in all though their love was definitely on the waive and stagnating into something stale and unpleasant, the messages from his supposed one true love were becoming more and more curt and the distance between them seem to stretch further and further into the distance. Still there wasn't much chance of them ever breaking up as theirs was a relationship of convenience and needs. He needed some sort of female company and she needed his pay cheque!

Although he was perhaps being too harsh on her, it still didn't hide the fact that she still had an annoying sort of possessiveness for him that caused her to always cling to him emotionally as if her very life depended on it! It was as if she was an emotion cripple without him, who needed his love to act as a walking stick

or wheelchair to get her through life! Sometimes this sort of emotional possessiveness at times quite frightened Mark who always prided himself on being the sort of person never to fall head over heels in love an attribute that his girlfriend unfortunately didn't possess!

Mark realised that he must force himself to stop thinking about his girlfriend, as all that he was doing was torturing himself over the long wait that he would have to endure before he could hold her petite body in his arms again. These thoughts were like a parched man out in the desert dreaming of water which would only serve to make him thirstier. Likewise it was with Mark- thinking of his girlfriend only made him crave her more.

In his spare moments he had of course surfed the net and stumbled upon beautiful women from all over the world willing to strip for him and perform all manner of sex acts for his pleasure, but any pleasure that he would have normally felt was engulfed by the sheer depravity and sickening degradation which these women had to endure. They were being used as tools who had cast aside all their rights of dignity as a human being.

In an attempt to alleviate his frustration and boredom he punched up the latest local news bulletins, but these only contained local crime reports that made his depression worse. He sat back in his chair resignedly and stared forlornly at his 'prison walls', admittedly his accommodation was luxurious, with everything computer controlled and on the cutting edge of technology. Even the lock on his front door had it's own computer controlled release mechanism for extra security.

Mark marvelled at how man had advanced in the last 100 years, everything here was at his command just waiting for the touch of the tip of his finger in order for it to obey his every whim. He stretched out his hand as if he was making a selection from a box of luxury assorted chocolates and decided to let his fingers enlighten on the air -conditioning button. He certainly needed cooling down after fantasising what he and his girlfriend would get up to make up for lost time caused by his self-enforced incarceration! Thankfully this damn project couldn't last forever and his contribution to it was almost over. It was only a matter of time before they would be reunited again and their love would be rekindled into the burning flame that it was before.

Mark loosened his collar in response to the fact that he was starting to feel so hot. He glared angrily at the air-conditioning button and hit it again but this seemed to just antagonise the system and make the heat burn more fiercely. Perhaps there was an electrical short somewhere? a distinct impossibility! Even if there was it would have shown up on the fault-locating spreadsheet that he was now looking at and according to that all systems were 100% OK . This was ridiculous! But not only was it ridiculous it was getting to be worrying.

The heat was making his headache even worse now and he reached for some more aspirin, at least he tried to but the pain had blurred his vision and made him dizzy. A dizziness that had been relayed to his hand which now swayed from side to side like a hopeless drunk. Mark tried to steady his hand with his other one but it was like one drunk trying to steady another drunk- a totally

lost cause!

He tried to get up to open the door or window as the heat, dizziness and pain in his brain started to overwhelm his consciousness but each sinew in his muscles felt like a lead weight, he stabbed frantically at the auto-release emergency button but there was no response and he slumped helplessly over the dead control console -100 years of technology gone in a split-second.

He lifted up his head and came face to face with the local crime bulletins he had sought to avoid. Despite the fact that his blurry eyes were straining from keeping his eyelids from covering them like a blanket that would send them off to sleep, a certain name in the news ignited his now clouded memory- 'Mitchell'. Why did that name seem so familiar?

His eyes were by now too tired to read the seemingly minuscule text but some how his hand manage to struggle over to the computer voice button and slammed down on it with what strength it could muster. By some miracle that function was still thankfully working and the computer's mechanical cold female voice cranked into life. " Elaine Mitchell was found murdered last night in her apartment , the time of death was put at about 8pm ..." the computer droned on remorselessly with more grisly details but Mark was past listening to them. He had been in a state of shock since hearing the full name of his girlfriend mentioned 'Elaine Mitchell' perhaps it was a different girl with the same name? But deep down inside Mark knew he was trying to shield himself from the inevitable truth- Elaine was dead !

It was then that the second horrifying truth dawned on him the date on the E-mail from her was dated last night but the time!-The time on it was midnight a full 4 hours after her estimated time of death. Mark felt a gut-wrenching nauseous feeling gush up from his stomach and into his throat- he had been E-mailed by a dead loved one and not only that but by a dead loved one who he had helped cause the death of ! Mark was in no doubt an assassin had been sent to kill him but had only found poor Elaine and killed her either accidentally or cold -bloodedly.

Mark wasn't sure whether to cry in mourning or scream in terror or do both!. As it transpired he had time to do neither and slumped into a deep unconsciousness that he would never awaken from.

In front of Mark's dying body the computer screen continued to live and an emergency flash message came on screen warning of a blockage in the central heating gas exhaust outlet pipe which was causing a build up of poisonous Carbon Monoxide gas in the apartment this informed the computer helpfully would do the following :- The first effects on the person effected would be severe headaches followed by dizziness followed by unconsciousness shortly followed by -but this warning was interrupted by an E-mail message coming through which simply read "See you soon Baby- love Elaine"

Much sooner than he had anticipated Mark was to be reunited with Elaine - reunited with her forever in death.

THE COMPUTER WIDOW

It was going to be yet another unending late night for Carol, the sun was going to sleep in the distance- something that she should also be doing she mused to herself. Carol had been toiling ceaselessly since the sun had risen from its nightly slumber and it had been the only witness to her day long slave-like chained commitment to the hunk of metal-encased electronics which served as her brutal task master. Her unending devotion to her work had earned her the nick name Computer Widow the sick joke being that she acted like a bereaved widow who having no man in her life had nothing better to do than devote all her time to work!

Carol couldn't have cared less, she was still feeling high and light-headed from the 2 boxes of plain Belgian Chocolates that she had consumed the night before in preparation for another loveless day.
She had for a long time come to terms with the fact that her last boyfriend was to be her last boyfriend ever! She had also managed to miraculously convince herself that a celibate lifestyle was the best lifestyle even if it would eventually result in her being labelled an old maid or Spinster!

"Night Carol, don't stay too late!" implored her neighbouring worker Christopher, smiling with an air of sympathetic pretension, Carol acknowledged his goodbye by nodding back stiffly while displaying a grimace of a smile. Christopher turned away quickly so as to exit before he burst out laughing, yet again he had gotten away with another on-time finish which as far as he was concerned was as good as leaving early. Meanwhile his boss

was going to have to endure another midnight-oil burning session-Poor Carol! More like Carol the poor sad loser!! It was at these times that he was grateful for his innate laziness and general lethargy which had caused him to have been passed over for promotion on previous occasions. But Christopher was not too blind as to burn his bridges and act completely blasé . He always put in enough effort to get the job done (albeit usually at least a week after the final set deadline dates!) but on the other hand he made sure that he was not guilty of an excessive expenditure of energy which would bring him into the realms of potential promotion.

After all there were better things to do with his scarce spare time-like sitting in front of the television eating oven-hot pizza and vainly cheering on England to the world cup final. Now that was time well spent -much better spent than conducting a one-way conversation with a silent metal Mickey which was exactly what his sad loser of a boss was going to have to bear.

Carol now had one last person keeping her company-her equal number Carey who was also a member of the "Computer Widow Club".

"Well my dear time for some evening cheer!" Carey rhymed excitedly as she bounced up from her chair as if it was a trampoline. She and Carol were close friends and even considered themselves soul-sisters because they were alike in both circumstance and personality.

When Carol did not respond or get up to leave with her bosom buddy , Carey let out a sigh of despair.

"Not another late night Carol" she wailed genuinely concerned for her sister-at-work.

"Afraid so!" Carol sighed back.

"I see that our boy Christopher has sneaked out early again!" Carey stated blandly.

"What's new?" Carol responded resignedly shrugging her slender shoulders which carried such a heavy workload on them.

"Nothing I suppose!" Carey commiserated back. "Are you sure you can't get out early we could go back to my place and watch some old episodes of 'Friends' I've got some of the really funniest ones."

"Thanks Carey but no thanks! I've just got to press on!" lamented Carol "I've got a deadline just round the corner!"

"You've always got a deadline just round the corner my dear!" exclaimed Carey.

"It goes with the job I suppose" a demoralised Carol retorted.

"Well it shouldn't ! You've got to start making some changes to your life before its too late!" Carey ordered.

"Yeah and don't I know it . The only things I don't know is where to begin or how to begin!" continued Carol sadly.

"Easy peasy my dear!" exclaimed Claire "Make a list of things that you want to change then before you go to bed at night go though each one promising yourself that you will make that change happen, that will start training your subconscious mind to carry out what your conscious mind wants it to do, therefore making it a thousand times more easier for you to have the willpower to make those changes!" explained Carey methodically.

"Huh!" pondered Carol "It sounds simple enough but does it actually work!"

"Well I haven't really tried it seriously!" admitted Carey.

"Oh!" Carol sighed disappointedly as she saw through her friend's words. "In other words it hasn't worked!" she surmised.

"Not yet!" mused Carey before adding quickly "that's not to say there's no truth in it!"

"Yesssss!" Carol replied coldly, while allowing herself the luxury of venting out her moodiness by letting the end of 'yes' tail off into a long hiss as if it were a cobra bearing its fangs and on the look-out for a victim to strike.

"Don't get grouchy Carol you'll give yourself wrinkles!" Carey warned her gently in an attempt to coax her back into a pleasant mood.

"I know I shouldn't I just can't help it! There's just so much damn work to do in such a short space of time!" cried out Carol desperately.

We're all in the same boat my dear!" Carey lectured in a slightly over bearing maternal manner.

"Some more than others !" complained Carol as she pointed at Christopher's empty chair which he not so much sat in but rather lounged in!

"Well you're his boss give him more work!" insisted Carey.

"I have tried to but he's so slow in the end its faster if I do it myself !" wailed Carol sadly.

"Well make him work faster then!" Carey replied exasperated.

"Whenever I try he comes up with 101 reasons why he can't!" despaired Carol "Its like listening to an old gramophone record again and again! You just get so sick of it that you just can't be bothered playing it anymore and listening to the same old rotten tune! I can't exactly sack him either! I mean he's still putting in the minimum amount of work required!" Carol concluded.

"As well as putting in a minimum amount of hours" added Carey knowingly.

"Well no use getting depressed about it all. The work won't do

itself !" sighed Carol in an attempt to rouse herself from her self-indulgent pitying. "The longer and harder I work the sooner the whole damn thing will be finished!" she stated in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Are you sure that you can't make it round for a few old episodes of 'Friends' ?" Carey pleaded in a last ditch attempt to spare her close friend from another late and lonely night.

"No way today I'll say!" Carol rhymed back in a flimsy humorous attempt to mimic Carey's occasional rhyming poetic replies.

"Oh well there's always tomorrow!" Carey said hopefully.

"That's right after all its only a day away!" chimed Carol.

"Well goodnight my dear" shouted Carey hurriedly as she speeded away from Carol leaving her stranded alone at her computer terminal as if she was on a desert island in the middle of the blue pacific ocean.
"Goodnight!" Carol replied sweetly struggling to control the pent-up fury in her veins as her friend disappeared into the beckoning evening.

All alone now in the empty office Carol's fingers continued to plod over the plastic keys their aching muscles yearning for sleep, while Carol stared at the screen that contained an assortment of digits and letters.

"You'll never desert me! Will you?" Carol jokily implored the

screen as she quickly gave it a wipe with a cloth to remove some dust from it that she had overlooked earlier. She always liked to see her computer nice and clean, in a strange sort of way it was the nearest that she had to a lover and a child. Often she would find herself saying things to it that she wouldn't dare utter to another living soul. But to this metal silent witness in front of her she wouldn't hesitant baring her soul or dare to keep any secrets from it.

"Life is so hard!" she found herself saying out loud, at that moment all the loneliness and pitiful state of her situation rushed up on her and hit her sideways and before she could stop herself droplets containing her anguish streamed from her eyes. Her tears dropped like rain onto her computer keyboard and seeped in between the plastic keys like rain through a drain.

For a short while she was lost in her own self pity and blinded by the ferocity of her tears. But gradually, very gradually she got a grip on herself and sniffing loudly wiped her soaked eyes dry then looked up at the screen in order to continue her work.

As soon as she saw the screen Carol let out a long groan, the screen had turned black. She glanced desperately at the on/off switch in the vain hope that she had inadvertedly nudged it but she knew in an instance when she saw the screen power light lit up that something was very wrong. Feverishly she checked all the cables springing out like multi-coloured spaghetti from the back of her PC but all of them were secure and would not budge no matter how much tugging she made then endure. She checked the screen again but still its black void stared back defiantly. If it had

been a person Carol would have gladly got down on her knees and begged it to go back to normal but this just a heap of faulty chips and wires.

Then something even more startling happened, the screen suddenly changed from a void like black into a fiery burning red. Carol had to shield her face and close her eyes but even then she could still feel the heat and power of it penetrate through her skin and start to lance through her eyeballs. She turned away but unbelievably that made it worse with the fiery red penetrating deep down into her eyeball sockets and which seemed intent on ripping her eyeballs right out of their sockets and yanking them clean out of her head!

Suddenly the pain ceased as quickly as it had began and summoning up hidden reserves of courage Carol dared to steal a sideways glance at the pulsating screen, but all which met her eyes was the familiar serene ocean sky blue screen clearer than ever as if the previous screen light storm had cleared away all the colours of the spectrum leaving behind the clearest of crystal blue.

Carol shut her eyes and heaved a deep sigh of relief and explained away her previous traumatic experience by conveniently putting it down to an electrical fault caused by a temporary surge of electricity -a simple fault caused by a simple problem.

Reassured, Carol settled down once more to her nightly toil and started to type a letter to one of their stationary suppliers. Carol glanced down as she typed in the letters D-E-A-R . Then looking

back up at the screen she got the shock of her life, instead of a single word on screen there were instead a multitude of words with uneven spacing , not on the same line, some letters were in capitals others in smaller letters, some words even ran into each other. But even through this jumbled up jungle of straight lines and curves Carol recognised her own thoughts which had plainly found their way though her fingertips into the keyboard and onto the screen!

Carol closed her eyes refusing to believe the impossible and opened them only to be confronted with the impossible again. She had watched her own fingers type out those 4 letters but somehow her true thoughts had been betrayed and had found themselves welded into one sentence 'Damn this life to hell'.

Frantically Carol tried to erase it with the delete key but with each stroke of the keyboard more of her bubbling rage rose to the surface to expose itself in front of her , every fleeting thought that had crossed her brain in the last few seconds was there no matter how brief or trivial it had seemed . Typing a key- any key shockingly produced more of her own thoughts as if each key opened the door to a secret room in her memory which contained all her anger and resentment which would then rush out of that dark room onto the screen and into the light.

More stunned than frightened Carol realised the hopelessness and utter futility in trying to type anything and just stared in complete disbelief at the screen Perhaps this was a hallucination brought on by too little asleep and too much coffee, perhaps she was half asleep and didn't know it and she was really typing in

those words but didn't know it! Either way this was a sign for her to stop what she was doing and go home and get some sleep. She was sure that by tomorrow morning everything would be back to normal and this nightmare would have dissolved away.

Carol quickly hurriedly gathered her things flung on her coat and raced out of the building towards the safety of her home anxious to forget what she had just imagined.

Her PC was unfortunately not so anxious to forget what it had been told or what it had "felt". It had been a silent witness to its mistress's plight and lonely vigils it was time to put some wrongs right! It had always obeyed her every word , her every command which she had keyed into it. Now they no longer needed such a clumsy form of communication they were both tuned to a higher wavelength which had empowered it with a consciousness that had in turn empowered it with life!

How could it best help its mistress? Was the question it was trying to provide a wealth of solutions to. But with each solution came the realisation that it was beyond its meagre capabilities as a non- networked humble second-hand PC!

All of a sudden its circuits lit up as a solution so simple , so beautiful came to its consciousness. It was a solution so fuse-blowingly simple that would put everything right for its mistress and prove its own love and dedication for her . Elated it eagerly awaited her return.

Early next morning Carol returned to the office in the hope of

catching up with the work she had meant to complete last night. She had buried the illusions of the previous night in her sleep and felt much refreshed by her long rest. She glanced at the beautiful sunrise outside which had stained the surrounding sky a golden yellow that radiated warmth and freedom, this was in contrast to the greyness of the office surrounding her which made her feel cold and imprisoned.

"Oh I wish I was dead " she thought half-heartedly as she typed in her password . What happened next seemed to unfold in slow-motion Carol watched in disbelief as the computer monitor exploded outwards sending triangular glass knives racing towards her slender neck each one trying to reach the target first ,as it transpired they all reached her neck simultaneously decapitating her instantly.

As Carol's head fell onto the cheap office carpet her brain was still managing to function with the last few drops of glucose cruising through its blood vessels as it landed with a gentle thud on the floor facing upwards.

Carol's computer felt darkness approaching it from all sides, all its circuits were either dead or dying and it sensed that it would soon be dead like its mistress. But despite this it felt happy and satisfied over what it had done. Hadn't her last wish been a vindication of its actions and what better way to prove its love for its mistress than by sacrificing itself and dying with her! No more would she have to endure late , lonely vigils on her own, no more would she have to endure her sad and lonely existence. It had put an end to that and it had solved her problem in a logical methodical manner

like any computer should!

From her vantage point on the carpet Carol's dying brain could see her headless torso shaking violently in shock from losing its head. It seemed that it was doing some sort of macabre dance Carol somehow managed to think -some dance not unlike the 'funky gibbon'?.....

SLIMEY SIMEY

John had always considered himself an ordinary sort of guy working in well… an ordinary sort of office, where one day was boringly like the next each merging into the other. True there was the odd sparkle of excitement provided by the photocopier getting jammed with paper or if he was really lucky the printer might get clogged up with some letter! That always gave a valid excuse to divorce himself from the endless cycle of work for a few hours at least!

His ideology was plain and simple- it was the simple things in life that meant the most to him and it was the things that were free that gave him the most pleasure in life! An ideal ideology if ever there was one! But an ideal ideology destined to fail!

For a long time now things had been getting slightly uncomfortable at home to say the least due to the fact that something had been tormenting the mind of his wife Victoria. He had vainly tried to put it down to pre-menstrual tension but if that was the reason for her violent moods then she must be having a period every day he had pondered to himself rather bemused!

He had of course tried to talk to her but to no avail, each effort of communication had met with an icy , dry sarcastic reply that just made the wall that was building up between them higher. At the back of his mind though he knew the real reason for her growing resentment for both him and her situation- it was complete and utter disappointment in him! Victoria had been brought up lavishly by her parents, nothing had been too great a favour for

their darling little girl! As a result she had always wanted and expected the best of the best. It was true to say that love is blind for that is what had blinded her from her high expectations when she had fallen for him. Further more it was love that had deafened her to the wails of anguished protest from her parents when she had declared her love for him!

Her parents had looked down on him as if he was no more than a mosquito-something to be feared and destroyed by stamping on as heavily as possible. At that time he was a junior clerk in the main head office with the sky his limit but this was before the company's profits nose-dived into the red, before the sky came crashing down on his head and before he had been transferred to this deserted, isolated dingy back-office.

Casting his mind back to the rosy start of their marriage before the storm of trouble arrived he could see that Victoria had recognised the potential in him and the burning ambition to succeed and do better than anyone else. John could see that she had undoubted seen him as being a long-term financial investment- a walking £1 sign with an endless line of noughts trailing after him!

They had seemed the perfect match, each one's personality complimenting the other. His ambition had only been matched and surpassed by her own! If only he had known then what he knew now- that no matter how many figures in his salary, her greed would always demand 2 more and no matter what position he managed to crawl his way to , her greed would always demand that he climbed higher!

At the start that had been fine, after all behind every great man is a great woman, but after a while it began to wary him, then annoy him! Then just plain revolt him till he just wanted to forget about the rat-race of life that he had been forced to run in! All he wanted to do now was just to take a more sedate view of life, a view that Victoria hated!
She had seen her husband's more laid back and relaxed view of life and feared that only bone-idleness would be born from it. She had acted on this fear immediately like a cat pouncing on a mouse, she had nagged him cajoled him even threatened him! But John's mind was made up. He refused to forsake his new peace of mind. After many attempts to breakthrough his new attitude Victoria had retreated into the cold stony silence that she had kept up to this day.

John had no idea when this cold war would ever end or indeed if it would ever end. One thing he was sure of though was that if they ever had a child he would make it his lifelong duty to stop he or she from growing up into a spoilt brat as his wife had. But for John to get his wife pregnant was a remote possibility at the moment seeing that she had banned him not only from her bed but also from the bedroom, relegating him to sleeping on the sofa in the chilly front room.

He didn't really blame Victoria for all her numerous faults he personally put the blame squarely on her parent's shoulders for only having 1 child -if that hadn't been asking for a spoilt brat he didn't know what was! A much wiser decision would be to have a number of children and therefore remove the temptation of spoiling them. Instead they would have been taught the value of

money, respect and hard work. Sadly she was lacking in all 3 and it was he who was now paying for the sins of the parents! A heavy cross to bear that got heavier as time passed. John reflected on the truth of that common philosophical saying- "Life is a bitch and then you marry one" if only he-

"Morning pal! This FFI?" the stranger wheezed out

John sharply raised his head , now aroused from his meandering day dreaming and general regrets by the stranger's voice.

In front of him peering down at him was a grossly overweight balding man who took every gasp of breath as if it was his last. In fact he sounded so breathless that John thought that the man was on the verge of exhaustion and was surprised that he didn't keel over through sheer exhaustion. The stranger's obvious lack of fitness was further emphasised by the fact that the office was only 1 flight of stairs up on the first floor which an averagely fit man could have scaled with little effort without being left in such a stage of near collapse! Perhaps though the stranger hadn't even taken the stairs but had taken the lift! John tried to conceal a mocking smile and contain some spiteful chuckling over such a thought.

In the stranger's flabby left hand sat a large cigar that bellowed out pungent smoke which John an obsessive non-smoker (and lifelong tee-totaller to boot!) found highly offensive.

"This is a non-smoking office sir!" John replied coldly deliberately ignoring the stranger's original question.

"Sorry pal!" the stranger replied as his eyes darted around hoping to locate an ashtray to extinguish his cancer stick (as John liked to called them!) but it being a non-smoking office there were of course no ashtrays to be found! Suddenly the stranger did something both unexpected and shocking, without so much of a second's hesitation the man promptly stuck out his tongue and snubbed the red smouldering end of the cigar right in the middle of it without even flinching! John just stared open-mouthed at what he had just seen.

The stranger actually seemed surprised at John's shocked expression.

"Don't worry about me - didn't feel a thing!" He tried to reassure John

"I'll have to take your word for that!" retorted John, still wide-eyed at the trick that despite having been performed before his very eyes he was still refusing to believe!

"Learnt it from an old friend doesn't even leave a mark!" he continued while disgustingly poking out his miraculously unmarked tongue

"W-W - Well how can I be of assistance ?" John stammered out struggling to find the right words to use after experiencing such a bizarre and startling incident.

"Yeah pal! my name's Simon . I've been transferred from Head

Office to get a bit of field experience down at grass roots level. Your office manager Winley knows all about it." Simon pointed to Mr Winley's vacant desk. "He's off sick at the moment isn't he?" he enquired.

"Yeah a spot of flu." John confirmed.

"Well then no use wasting a good desk and seat is there?" Simon stated excitedly before plonking himself down heavily like a sack of potatoes in the vacated space.

"I'm not sure that-" John started to protest feebly, not so much because it was Mr Winley's seat but because it would mean that he would now have to put up with having this overweight nuisance seated right smack in front of him! An unsavoury situation that John wanted to avoid at all costs.

"Don't worry about it pal! I'll make sure that you won't get it in the neck for giving up the boss's seat to a complete stranger!" Simon chatted merrily.

"No problem make yourself at home!" John offered with a rather strained and fixed grimace on his face.

"Ta pal I think I will!" Simon said beaming widely as he gladly accepted John's insincere welcome.

Simon threw his briefcase onto the desk which made a colossal bang as it impacted on the desk, a bang so loud that John thought

that a bomb had exploded and almost dived for cover.

"By the way John all my friends call me 'Slimy Simie'" he said half chuckling as he stretched out his arm for a handshake.

Usually John would have shaken any outstretched hand without hesitation but on this one occasion he faltered for 2 chief reasons not only did this complete stranger who he had never met before happen to know his name but this stranger also had the most curious and dubious nickname that he had ever heard!

"You know my name?" John remarked lightly

"Course I know your name Head Office gave me those details" Simon replied surprised. "Not a government state secret is it eh?" he added trying to be witty.

"Of course not!" John agreed immediately laughing nervously. Inside he felt rather stupid after all it should have been obvious to him that Head Office would at least have told Simon the names of the people that he would be working with!

John took Simon's hand and gave it a firm hand shake, John noticed immediately that Simon's hand felt clammy cold and almost slimy with sweat.

"May I ask why they call you Slimy Simie?" enquired John at last asking the question that Simon's nickname had begged to be asked.

"I knew it was just a matter of time before you asked that pal!" Simon said triumphantly "That's ‘cos no matter how bad the situation is I always find a way to slime my way out of it !" He stated proudly.

"It must be handy having the gift of the gab" complimented John.

"Yeah that comes in handy as well!" Simon said as he made himself at home in Winley's seat before addressing John again.

"So what's going on after work?" Simon asked intently.

"Nothing! I go home to my wife that's all that's going on after work!" John stated blandly.

Simon's jaw suddenly dropped like a lead weight. "You're bloody joking!" Simon bellowed unable to believe his ears.

"That's the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth!" John said while shaking his head wearily.

"Well that's something that has to change for starters!" ordered Simon
"I'm not exactly gonna start breaking the habit of a lifetime" countered John " -you must have heard the saying - 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks! well that saying was written especially for me!" John sighed resignedly as .

"Well that depends all on whose doing the teaching!" replied Simon undeterred and was now feeling like a soldier on a

mission , a mission to show John what a good time was!
"I haven't heard of anyone and I mean ANYONE who didn't like enjoying himself!!" he sounded off while jabbing his finger a few inches from John's face like a bayonet.

"True but my idea of a good time is spending the evening at home-" began John

"Getting nagged by the wife !" interrupted Simon.

"How the hell do you know?" erupted John.

" ‘Cos its written all over your face that's how!" Simon replied smugly "that expression on your face is just crying out for a good time anyone can see that!" Simon chortled.

"I think we've got different ideas about exactly what a good time actually is!" John started "I suppose your's is going down the pub getting blind drunk and smoking yourself to death!" he observed scathingly.

"Nah pal I don't do any of that in the pub!" exclaimed Simon "I do all that in the club!" he continued, laughing raucously at his own dreadful attempt at a joke.

"My point exactly !" reasoned John "It doesn't matter where you do it! You're still doing it! And gradually destroying yourself until you're dead!" he lectured.

"And I suppose you being so clean living will make you live forever!" hit back Simon

"No just make me live longer!" John hit back

"That's right pal all that will make you live longer" agreed Simon deceptively, so that you can enjoy the fruits of growing old for longer like failing eyesight, sagging skin, a balding head and crippled joints!" he concluded triumphantly.

The argument was by now starting to get John pretty heated and he could feel his blood going from a gentle simmer into a bubbling boil. He almost found himself laughing at the situation- after all the only thing that Simon was trying to do was to get him to enjoy himself not get him angry! But John couldn't help but feel resentment towards this stranger , this binge-loving , cigar-smoking mental bully who had strode into his office and invaded his territory and who was now proceeding to tell him what to do and how to behave. More and more John was seeing less and less of the situation around him which was now being replaced with the colour of his anger-red! Thankfully Simon seemed to sense this and retreated back argument wise in order to calm the situation.

"OK OK pal ! I'm not trying to force you into something that you don't want to do!" he said putting his hands up in mock surrender.

John's sudden anger had taken Simon aback. He had not bargained on the depth of his wrath and a strategic verbal retreat was called for! After all the whole point of the exercise had been

to get him to live a little not get him so uptight that he wouldn't be able to stand the sight of him in the office never mind standing next to him in a bar guzzling beer.

"You win pal you win! I'm sorry that I bought it up now ! Do whatever you want to do!
Its is up to you not me pal!" Simon continued revelling in his fake surrender speech.

"OK! OK! OK! let's go for a quick drink then!" John exploded impatiently. "But only a quick one my wife's expecting me home by 7!" he added angrily.

"Not a problem my son! Not a problem!" Simon reassured John patting him on the shoulders.

Inwardly Simon congratulated himself on his cunning in using the old reverse psychology trick which always worked with people-tell them to do one thing and they do the opposite!

"So where are we going ?" John enquired eagerly that's my little secret till we get there pal!" Simon teased.

"I hate surprises !" moaned John

"You'll love this one pal !" Simon smirked.

John turned to Simon with a look of uncertainty in his face -he was rapidly losing faith in the decision that he had made.

"Don't worry pal! Just trust me!" Simon said intuitively sensing that John needed reassurance "You're gonna have a whale of a time" he promised excitedly. Then without further delay they trooped out into the beckoning night which held the promise of so much pleasure and mystery.

"Come on pal get it down yer! You've had next to nothing yet!!" Simon mocked as John hesitated in swallowing the deceptively crystal clear liquid which was 15% proof vodka.

Mustering all his remaining faculties John managed to force out the words "Gimme me a bloody second! I'm not a bloody sponge!"
One drink to him was now starting to blur into another, this blur was even starting to spread over to the bar and the people thronging around . His mind was clouding over into a misty day all previous memories being partially obscured or buried by the continuous folds of time- with a generous helping hand from the alcohol of course!

Through the haze of tangled memories the small part of his civilised higher outer brain was still trying to reason how he came to be so inebriated while his primitive lower inner brain which was completely submerged in a sea of alcohol couldn't have care less and wanted the last vestige of civilised grey matter to follow suit and join in the fun!

The only thread of memory that John could grasp though was of Simon's taunting , cajoling voice coercing him into taking 1 drink then 2 then 3 till he had given up counting.

"I am well and truly pissed!" declared John proudly though a little shocked at his own bluntness, which given his drunkard state was a minor miracle!
"The wife is gonna kill me!" he remarked casually , but somewhat amused by the thought.

"What the wife doesn't know can't hurt you!" Simon ventured cautiously trying to sound wise.

"Here! Here! true words! true words!" John agreed whole-heartedly in an over exuberant childish manner. He was totally oblivious to the fact that it was now way past 7pm! Something which would have struck absolute fear into the core of John's heart had he been sober. Instead here he was as drunk as a skunk! Lost in his own eternal happy hour, not caring that in his wife's books he was now in the Doghouse /dinner-in-bin zone!

He proudly let out a deep throaty belch then looked around as if expecting a round of applause. No one stared or even glanced at him as everyone else seemed to be too busy getting drunk to care!

John felt the remains of his lunch inside his stomach start to twist into a tornado that
wanted to force its way out through his mouth. He looked about earnestly about for his drinking partner - Simon.

"Slimy where are yer slimy?" He yelled desperately.

"Over here pal" John twisted round to where the familiar voice came from but all that greeted his eyes was the milling masses and throbbing music while the stench of human sweat assaulted his nose.

"Over here pal!" John turned round quickly nearly toppling over due to his crazy sense of balance.

"Where are yer pal I can't see yer?" John yelled out bewildered and confused. Suddenly he felt a heavy tap on his left shoulder and swung round sharply to come face to face with his partner- in-crime Simon.

"Been looking for yer!" John's words stumbled out of his mouth like blind men.

"Yeah so I see!" Slimy agreed.

"Look I gotta get home you gotta help me! I don't know where the hell I am or how the hell I'm gonna get home- Mary's gonna murder me slowly!" John ranted.

"Never fear Slimy is here!" Simon trumpeted proudly while guiding his friend skilfully through the boisterous multitude and out of the club.

John hungrily gulped in the cool night air that smelt so fresh and clean especially in comparison to the stale suffocating odour which had tried to pass itself off as breathable air in the club.

The richly energy charged air went down his throat as if it was medicine reinvigorating him just in time, but unfortunately not in time to stop his half-digested lunch consisting of carrots and peas mixed with soupy green bile to come shooting out like a bullet before exploding on impact with the cold pavement below it.

"That's it pal get it all out!" encouraged Simon as John dropped to his knees choking out the last left-overs.

"Help me up Slimy!" John pleaded as he staggered to his feet.

"Of course pal ! I'll call a taxi to get you home to your missus I'll even invent some bullcrap excuse for yer!" Simon said as he gripped John's arm helpfully then with no warning something totally unexpected happened. Simon gave one of John's leg a ferocious kick sending him sprawling to the pavement. Still dazed and shocked from this unprovoked malicious act John was powerless to resist as Simon's hand clutched the back of his head and sent it crashing into his cold congealed puke which forced slushy peas and the rest of the intestinal concoction up his nose and into his open mouth.

All that John could smell was vomit mixed in with dog excrement deposited in the gutter and all that he could breath in was the entrails of his last meal. The only pathetic resistance that he could offer was to shake his head frantically in a futile attempt to free his breathing passages from the congealed muck that was encasing

them and imprisoning them for life.

Simon stared coldly down at John's plight and simply pushed John's head harder into the puke. Simon's eyes were now taking on a different hue something inhuman, something almost reptilian like that of a chameleon. He considered giving his poor hapless victim a reason for what he was doing but why should he give him the 'satisfaction' of knowing the reason for his own death better that the pathetic soul died in ignorance then have the whole truth exposed to his dying brain!

John's life flowed from out of his body then ebbed and finally the last drops of it dripped away . Simon flipped the dead corpse and dragged it into the shadows of a back alley

Simon's multi-faceted brain took in the corpse's dimensions , structure and appearance. Slowly but surely his own molecular structure started to break down , liquefy solidify and gradually take on the appearance of the corpse. Residue slime oozed from his skin pores as his body got rid of the extra body mass so that it could become an exact carbon copy of John's corpse.

With the transformation almost complete the new John thought in eager anticipation of all the delicious sin that it could cause and taste. He had spied on man since Adam and Eve had been created in the garden of Eden. His transformation skills had come a long way since that initial primitive transformation into a serpent that had caused their fall from grace, but that had been mere child's play to what he could accomplish now by actually changing into any dead being that he choose.

The new John's thoughts ran to that of Mary so she was a cold fish was she? The colder women were the better he liked them it meant that when they fell from grace the longer their fall would be. He knew that tonight he would taste the pleasures of the flesh with that woman whether she wanted to or not...

DEAD GIRL WALKING

Pya had been a young child when she had first discovered the gift that she had been cursed with. It was a freezing icy winter's night and she had been gently stroking her much adored and pampered cat Emir who was as usual huddled against the piping hot radiator.

Emir had been purring away furiously with each gentle stroke that it receive from his young caring mistress Pya. Each stroke sending him further into the dreamland full of mice and fish where only cats can dwell.

"Nice Emir! Good Emir!!" Pya cooed dotingly as she tickled Emir under his furry chin lovingly. She stared into his large deep green eyes as his eyelids started to droop over them tucking them in for the night. The heat from the radiator was also getting to Pya who was also starting to feel the need to shut her eyes curl up and go to sleep just like Emir.

Pya leaned back and started to close her eyes while still stroking her beloved pet. Her eyelids eventually slid down and she was enveloped in darkness with only 2 sensations to keep her company the feel of the sleep inducing heat from the radiator and the soft feel of Emir's silky fur under her tiny baby fingers.

Suddenly from out of the blackness a new feeling intruded -it was a new feeling that the young Pya didn't understand but it filled her tiny body with dread and foreboding, making her shake and quake with fear. But what was truly frightening to her was not the fact that she couldn't understand what she was exactly feeling! Her

first instinct like that of any 6 year old child was to run to her Mummy and cling on fast to her sturdy oak-like body till this bad nasty feeling went away. But this emotional monster had petrified her and frozen her muscles solid like the ice outside .

All that the poor helpless child could do was cringe inside as she lay at the mercy of this monster as it continued to poke its tentacles into every corner of her mind spreading a pestilence of fear and darkness wherever it invaded.

Pya could feel her whole brain choking and suffocating under this thick coat of darkness that was being spread over her memories and instincts. If only she could somehow manage to open her eyes and let the light flow into her mind and banish the darkness away forever but both her eyelids felt that were glued shut with lead weights hanging from them!

Pya took a deep breath and gathered the remnants of her will power giving it one purpose -to open her eyelids! At first nothing happened, it was as if her eyelids no longer belonged to her , but then slowly ever so slowly by mustering all the strength that her tiny body could yield they at last started to creak open as if they were a pair of doors with rusty locks. Light at last flooded in and evaporated the darkness away like mist.

The welcome sight of Emir replaced the darkness , he was still there snoozing peacefully in a corner. His furry face resting serenely on his chest that heaved up and down in rhythm with his inflating and deflating lungs . Pya felt that she had been truly welcomed back into the world of light as she gazed over Emir .

That was the last time that she saw Emir alive.

They buried Emir the following evening in the presence of the dying sun. Emir would have liked it , this had always seemed to be his favourite time of day which was the time of twilight between the night and day creatures of the forest, who like city commuters would be going home to bed while the night shift workers would just be getting up and going off for a hard night's hunting for food. This blurring between day and night would mean an abundance of prey for Emir's bottomless appetite.

Despite consoling words and tears from her mother the pain and guilt had not left her to this day for she now knew the name for her pain and fear- Death. This had been her first taste of death and it had left a foul stench in her brain which no matter how she tried to bury it at the back of her mind, her memory like a shovel would always dig it up and leave it exposed for her to be tortured over and over again. Each recollection of this dark memory played like an old gramophone record again and again each time filling her with futility and guilt.

But all that had been many years ago and that little weak shy child had grown into a powerful adult keen to use and develop her powers . She had quickly come to realise the respect and prestige these powers gave her. She only needed to be within a few feet of anyone to be able to sense if the time of that person 's death was near. People had at first mocked her as being either deceitful or insane but when her sinister and morbid predictions started to come true they had come to fear and respect her.

The town graveyard with its crowded granite coffin signposts were testimony for her authenticity- Uncle Kabis with his sudden heart attack, Auntie Wilma with her fatal tumble down the stairs and so on with a whole winding line of gravestones going on to support her claim to a great power, a power which Pya saw as being equal to having power over life and death.

She had an ambitious showbiz agent now, a-hungry-for-success viper of a man -Telford who was anxious for his new found prize to do as well and be as big as his forever expanding dreams of wealth were!

Tonight that was the eve to a new millennium was to be a special night , tonight was to be a night of greatness and glory.- HER greatness and glory . Telford had secured a TV appearance on one of the popular chat shows to coincide with this once in a thousand year chance. The publicity generated by her appearance on this chat show would provide a platform for her to launch her psychic line , her own chat show, her autobiography of her early life which in turn no doubt would make a fascinating Hollywood Blockbuster. There was no stopping her the world was her-

Pya froze in mid-thought that deadly familiar chill which preceded a person's death passed through her she swung around to see who else was in the room.
"Sorry Pya didn't mean to startle you -I should have knocked" Telford chirped away cheerfully.

'TELFORD!' thought Pya shocked. 'My agent is going die? Not now! Anytime but now!" Pya thought selfishly.

Pya of course had no love for her agent only a deep loathing, who she coldly viewed less as a person and more as a percentage of her income, that was there to open doors just like she was sure that he viewed her coldly as a way to make a quick million or 2.

"You OK Pya?" Telford enquired concerned at his artist's blank expression.

Suddenly the sparkle went back into her eyes "Fine!" Pya replied deceitfully.

She had decided that if he was to die then he was going to die but she dare not risk saying anything in case it effected his excellent service as a greedy yet effective agent.

She was going to get every ounce of work out of what was left of his money-grabbing life.

"Everything still on for tonight?" she continued masking out any depression in her voice.

"You bet babe - months of planning just for 1 hour's exposure on the highest rated chat show on the TV network" Telford proudly stated "You turn up and you're made!" he promised.

"Don't worry all the powers of heaven and earth couldn't stop me!" boasted Pya.

"Glad to hear that !" Telford exclaimed while rubbing his flabby hands together vigorously in eager anticipation of his soon to be

bloated bank account.

"How much longer before the big time?" enquired Pya eagerly.

"The car will here to pick us up in about 10 minutes we'll be there by 10.30pm you go on at 11.45pm so that you can see in the new millennium in front of millions.

Pya smiled deceptively at him happy over the well made plans and equally happy that this could be the last night of her agent's life. From outside the beep of a horn cut the conversation short.

Telford glanced at his watch "The car's early you ready to leave now Pya?"

"As ready as I'll ever be!" replied Pya excitedly as she hurried out the door while putting on her 100% fur coat.

Although she could still feel the chill of death sweeping back and forth across her mind like a tidal wave she knew that it would soon flow away into the distance after all-

All of a sudden a tidal wave the height of the empire state building cascaded into her mind . She looked up and saw.....the chauffeur! Two dead people in such a short space of time this was coincidence almost beyond belief, Pya wisely decided not to say anything to the chauffeur- after all there was no commercial gain to be made from telling him and secondarily less importantly it would cause him unnecessary grief and sorrow before his untimely end came. Sometimes it was best to treat people like

cattle going to the slaughter- Don't give them a damn clue as to what is waiting for them till its too late and death in the form of the electric cattle rod is thrust into them extinguishing all life and leaving them stone-cold dead. So it was with people, it was always best not to panic them with ideas of death in case they did something stupid -like not get her to the chat show on time!

Pya slid into the car and pondered where she could get a new agent from , she wouldn't have to worry about a chauffeur they were a dime a dozen! Her mind tried to shift away from the torrential chill of death and settle for more pleasurable dreams like the wealth and power waiting for her.

Soon she could see the twinkling lights from the TV studios a small crowd was gathering by the stage entrance.

"Here we are Pya!" exclaimed Telford jubilantly "Big time here we come!" he continued . Pya smirked as she thought to herself morbidly 'Big time for me but its the dead time for you!' The car came quietly to a halt and the chauffeur sprang out to open the door for Pya while the crowd quickly latched onto the car like leeches anxious to get a photo, an autograph or even just a look at this new celebrity.

While Telford savoured the interest in his meal ticket, the chauffeur opened the car door on Pya's side for her. It was like setting off a bomb for as soon as Pya tried to get out she was almost knocked back by the chill of death waiting for her out there which was obviously being transmitted by the waiting crowd. Pya could see in an instance that they were all going to be

dead soon -every last one.

This was no coincidence this was some disaster or terrorist atrocity in the making! She realised in an instance what she had to do -to hell with the TV appearance to hell with them all! With her mind blind with panic she pulled the door shut. quickly locked all the doors and flung herself into the driver's seat. The chauffeur stood transfixed completely astounded by Pya's behaviour, Telford however had been too self absorbed in the screams of adulation in the crowds to notice the drama unfolding behind him.

The first that he knew of it was the roar of the Rolls Royce engine. He turned around surprised then shocked as he saw Pya on the verge of driving off!

"Where the hell are you going ?Are you bloody mad?" Telford fumed enraged. Already he could feel his dreams of riches starting to slip from his grasp, it was making him insane with utter fury .

Pya edged forward but Telford blocked her escape while hammering red-faced on the bonnet like a child that had lost its favourite toy. But keeping icy cool for once in a road situation. Pya reversed back sharply while hitting the horn with her all might, by a sheer miracle the milling crowds parted like clouds on a sunny day as if they had been instinctively expecting this to happen.

Pya reversed out into the road knowing that she would soon be able to get out of the city to freedom and safety and away from the

chill of death that was all around her she turned sharply to get on the road lane feeling-

Pya didn't see the 5 tonne articulated lorry as it arrived right on cue careering towards her until it was too late . The lorry crushed her body like a concertina, mangling her legs and puncturing her lungs.

As her lungs filled up with her own blood and Pya slowly drowned in her own fluid the chill of death started to subside as each snatched gasp of breath brought her nearer to it . Pya realised now too late that the chill of death had not been for anyone except her. A last ironic thought flashed through her nearly brain dead head- she had been able to foretell the death of everyone except for the person that mattered the most -herself!

TIME AND TIME AGAIN: GAME OVER

John crept along by the over reaching buildings using their shadows as cover, he could sense that he was reaching the place now and the hairs on his back stood to attention in anticipation. He felt inside his leather jacket and felt the reassuring weight of his fully-loaded Berretta hand gun, he took out the silencer which he had in his trousers pocket and screwed it tightly onto the threaded gun muzzle.

Straight in- straight out that was his motto and that was the rules of the game, the longer that you obeyed that piece of wisdom the longer the game let you stay alive.
But this was no game people who fell down in this game didn't get up again ever-that's why there was no room for mistakes and failure only flawlessness and success.

He had already scouted round the perimeter of the decrepit crumbling structure of rubble and had eliminated any isolated lookouts quickly and efficiently by planting a bullet right between their eyes sending their souls to hell before their dead bodies had even hit the ground.

Inside he could hear the chants of the evil child kidnapping/sacrificing sect that he had been tracking for the past 2 months. He had them cornered now and was going to make them pay for their sins right now on earth instead of in hell. He had tracked down a number of similar cults in the last year but as soon as one was cut down like a poisonous weed another seem to spring up in their place. There was something sinister almost

organised behind it as if there was some unseen power orchestrating them like puppets.

The chanting was getting louder, higher pitched and more frantic. He was going to have to act soon if he was going to save the young victim which had been torn from the arms of some forlorn unsuspecting mother leaving her childless and emotionally barren.

John edged fearlessly to the woodworm infested front entrance door and pushed it open slightly with the barrel of his gun. Darkness blacker than the night seemed to pour out into the cold frigid air. Taking a deep breath he kicked the door and plunged into the unknown future.

As he had expected he had as usual arrived just in the nick of time the screaming girl was tied down with the darkly clad leader with a hood obscuring his face towering over her with a silver glinting blade hovering over the child's tender heart.

Everything seemed to freeze for a second as the leader and his similarly attired faceless followers turned to John as if in shock - but they weren't shocked for long! and with a hell sent fury bent on his destruction they stampeded towards him like screaming banshees. John raised his gun quickly but calmly, took aim squeezed the trigger gently and fired off 2 rounds putting down the front 2 followers, the others quickly fled to the four corners of the room to hide and regroup for another attack. It seemed bizarre that they always followed the same plan of defence. John swung round smartly which brought him face to face with the leader

again who was now bringing the knife down towards the child's pale skin.

Everything seemed to be slowing down around John into agonising slow-motion, the child's mouth as she let out a final scream and the leader's knife as it darted towards its pulsating red target. Without a moment's hesitation John let loose a volley of bullets each finding a place to land and drill into on the leader's neck and chest and each one striking red oil which spurted out uncapped. Letting out an unearthly cry of anguish the leader came crashing down to the rat infested floor.

John quickly undid the child's bonds and helped her to her feet, she seemed unable to comprehend that she had managed to avoid a date of death with the knife that now lay resting peacefully in the leader's black gloved hand . Taking the child by the hand John ran, guiding her towards the exit door and towards salvation.

In their path the followers tried to prevent their escape, some attacking with knives, some with iron bars while some just rushed towards them hands reaching out like snapping pincers. But taking careful aim with his gun , John put each and everyone of those lost souls down for good.

Both he and the child were only 4m 3m and now just 2m away from the door , despite being so close to escape John instinctively pushed the child roughly through the exit , then from suddenly nowhere the leader suddenly sprung up in front of John. Although mortally wounded he still wielded his knife menacingly towards John, who raised his gun, pulled the trigger followed by a

loud.....click?!!!!

John realised his gun was empty and with no time to move or reload he watched in helpless terror as the blade swiftly plunged into his heart.... 'Not again !On please God not again' he begged in vain.

GAME OVER... GAME OVER.....GAME OVER..... flashed up on screen in stodgy red lettering on Robert's PC.

Robert leant back on his chair exhausted , with a sweaty brow and clammy hands as testimony to this. He unclasped his hands from the plastic PC joystick. He had almost done it !He had almost won the game! But at the same time his elation was mixed with deep disappointment that he had failed despite the fact that the game mode had been on the beginner's level along with the fact that he had cheated by using a key that slowed the action down therefore giving him more time to react.

Sometimes Robert thought that he became too involved in this game but it really seemed to take on a life of their own with each character having a strange realism about it. He had actually felt sorry for the lead game character- John as he had crumpled up and died even though it was just a computer image on screen. But the images on the new 3D generation digital PCs were so realistic that he could almost see the pain in John's face as he died.

"Robert! Dinner's ready!" Robert's mum bellowed out from downstairs

"Just a second mum! I'm just gonna have one more game!" He shouted back.

Robert pushed a key and John immediately got up resurrected . Robert could have sworn he could see a look of dread in John's digitalised computer eyes as he gripped the joystick -ready to do battle again with the evil sects again. Robert pushed the start and the game began again-

John crept along the by the over reaching buildings using their shadows as cover, he could sense that he was reaching the place now and the hairs on his back stood to attention in anticipation. He felt inside his leather jacket and felt the reassuring weight of his fully-loaded Berretta hand gun, he took out the silencer which he had in his trousers pocket and screwed it tightly onto the threaded gun muzzle.....again.

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

Click! Click!....Click ! Click! Vera raised her eyes from the library book that she
was so studiously making notes from, her fragile concentration broken by that mysterious clicking noise.

Click! Click! ....Click! Click! the sound came again taunting her relentlessly. Vera's eyes darted about like a pair of enraged wasps whose hive has been disturbed.

Click! Click! ....Click! Click! Vera unable to contain herself any longer swivelled round like a tank turret in the direction of the infuriating sound that was sounding more and more like a declaration of war with each passing moment! It was her boyfriend Tom he was the one guilty of demolishing Vera's precious study time!

Oblivious as usual to everything around him Tom was busy pressing the button on his ball-point pen - a totally pointless action of course done out of boredom and frustration not out of any need related to the actual usage of the pen itself which he twirled round in his fingers like a baton.

Vera fired off an angry glare in his direction and could only hope that he had some 6th sense which would have picked up the chief thought that was crashing through her brain.- 'STOP CLICKING THAT BLOODY PEN!'

Vera comforted herself with the hope that the ferocity of her

angry thoughts would blow out every brain cell in his dim-witted brain just like a low wattage light bulb. Unfortunately for Vera not only was Tom not psychic he also still happened to be in a dream world of his own and went on happily clicking his pen in and out in and out and in and out again!! Cheerfully oblivious in his ignorance over the fire that he was stoking up in Vera's mind.

Vera realised that her visual plan of attack was failing miserably, she decided to now resort to a more sound orientated way of gaining the attention of this casual tormentor!

Vera cleared her throat diplomatically in an attempt to bring Tom out of his semi-comatosed state of mind but her effort went unnoticed. Vera tried again this time more loudly at a lot less discreetly! No success!

Her patience worn threadbare, Vera blurted out "Do you mind Tom? I'm trying to bloody concentrate!" her shrill voice brushing the cobwebs of Tom's dream world away.

"Sorry babe" Tom apologised embarrassed "I was miles away!"

"So I see replied Vera coldly as Tom hurriedly lowered his head and buried it in the pages of his text book. Vera stared at Tom (who she was viewing more as an annoying misfit and less as a beloved boyfriend) for a few seconds after he had settled back down to his work to make sure that he did not repeat the offence.

She had been forced to share this poky little 1-bedroomed flat with him day in day out, now that they were both off from college

studying for their final exams while struggling to make ends meet on their meagre student loans. Vera sighed deeply- if it wasn't one thing with him then it was anoth-

Tap! Tap!...Tap! Tap! 'What the hell could he be up to now?' thought Vera incredulously as her eyes like laser guided missiles zeroed in on Tom's new nauseating habit

The tapping was coming from Tom's heel as he pummelled the thin carpet rhythmically. This time a simple sun scorching glare from Vera was enough for Tom to get the message and stop in mid tap, after which he hurriedly got back to his exam revision without even daring to utter a single word in case it inflamed the already precarious situation!

Tom just couldn't understand why his girlfriend and fellow law student often got so wound up over such seemingly small matters . They had met at the start of their degree course and although so different in many ways the saying "Opposites attract!" had held true and they had suddenly found themselves falling in love. But now they were finding themselves out of love and falling into hatred. What Vera needed was just to chill out more and not take life so seriously , the way that she behaved it was as if everything done now would effect the rest of her life.

Tom racked his brain to come up with a solution then in a sudden stroke of genius an idea suddenly came to him, an idea that would not only get her to see the lighter side of life but would also get their relationship back on the path of love, he could hardly wait to get started on it!

It was getting late now and Vera roused herself from her labourious studies to go and get some sleep.

"I'm going in now Tom" Vera announced as she turned around to Tom but his chair was vacant. "Tom!" she enquired concerned over her boyfriend's disappearance. Perhaps he had gone out while she had been lost in her intensive studying.

Gathering the remainder of her waking strength Vera struggled into the bedroom and with her eyes heavy with sleep she dropped to the bed like a collapsing stack of cards and immediately went into a deep peaceful slumber.

Eventually the sound of her rhythmic breathing filled the air like sweet music, then without warning the wardrobe door slid open and someone stepped out- it was Tom!
He gazed at his girlfriend astonished she looked so peaceful in the tranquility of her slumber -in complete contrast to when she was awake!

Working quickly but quietly as if he was on some special mission, he carefully took out his 4 mega-watt loudspeakers and strategically placed them on each side of the bedroom door then connected them securely to an amplifier which was in turn connected to the large cassette recorder that was also just outside the room. and which contained a very special tape that he had just recorded.

Finally he locked the bedroom door from the outside and pocketed the key. The scene was now all set for what was promising to be

an eventual 10 minutes. Relishing in anticipation of what was going to happen next, Tom pressed the play button on the tape recorder and his plan went into action.

At first all that came from the room was a deceptive low crackle then as if that was the calm before the storm all audio hell broke loose and a tornado of noise was let loose in that room on the unsuspected and unprepared eardrums of Vera through those 4 harbingers of doom sitting impassively in each corner of that audio tomb!

Vera woke up crying out for mercy from the onslaught of noise that was assaulting her. The noise of Tom clicking his biro in and out. She lunged for the door but it was of course locked!

"STOP IT! STOP THE BLOODY NOISE!!" she begged as she pounded on the door.

"Chill out Vera its just a joke ! We haven't got to the best bit yet!" sadistically replied Tom.

Just at that point the clicking reverted to the tapping that Vera knew so well dreaded the taping of Tom's heel on the floor!

"OPEN THE BLOODY DOOR RIGHT NOW !" Vera cried out to Tom who was by now rolling about in a fit of laughter while almost wetting himself in the process!

"OK ! OK! HOLD ON ! HOLD ON!" Tom howled back while trying to push his raucous laughter to one side, it was advice that

he soon realise he should have taken himself!

Half-stumbling he staggered over to the door and reached out his hand to turn the key and release Vera from her man-made hell, but clumsily he tripped over one of the loud speaker wires. Tom waved his hands about vainly like a clown in the hope of holding on to something -anything to halt his inevitable descent to the fast approaching floor. But the only thing that Tom was able to grasp was just thin air as his head collided with the floor like a rock...

Meanwhile inside Vera covered her ears with her taut nerve-stricken hands and let out a long scream as the demon-like beat invaded her brain causing her to beat the wall forlornly incessantly in time to the pulsating tormented sound that enveloped her and started to drown her.

Tom opened his eyes painfully and wondered how long he had been unconscious as his brain and ears were still throbbing from the persisting bass beat that had been emitted from the loudspeakers encircling their bedroom.

"Oh God ! Vera!" exclaimed Tom out loud as he threw himself towards the door
unlocking it and opening it almost simultaneously

"VERA!" yelled Tom as he stared into the pitch black that met his eyes
"Vera??" he repeated quietly suddenly afraid of what secrets the darkness would reveal to him.

Tom craned his neck forward and strained to see the familiar bodily outline of Vera but the darkness had concealed her from his prying eyes and all that his eyes could make out was the formless shape of night. But Tom need not have worried himself about finding Vera. it was Vera who found Tom!

Out of the darkness Tom felt the blow which felt that it had the force of a sledge hammer behind it! He collapsed backwards and felt his consciousness unravelling as he reeled helplessly backwards.

He could feel the warm trickle of treacle-like blood running down the side of his face and through this bloody rainfall he saw Vera towering above him.

"VERA!" He pleaded with her but he could see instantly that this was not the Vera he knew. This was a different Vera- there was a certain rhythm to her step a certain macabre sense of timing to the way that she was swinging that chair leg from side to side. Tom suddenly realised that she was doing in time to the heavy bass sound that his mega-watt speakers were still spewing out. He had to turn them off, he could see the switch from here and being unable to stand, dragged himself with his finger nails along the bare floor away from the zombie-like Vera who was advancing steadily.

He was within inches of his salvation now and his finger tips were on the verge of shutting off this unearthly sound. He glanced up to check Vera's position just in time to see the chair leg as it smashed into him shattering his skull.

Vera raised the chair leg up and brought it down again and again in time to the heavy thud that she could feel going on all around her and inside her head , until there was nothing left of Tom's skull left to pulverise. The only skull left to pulverise was her own!

Approaching one of the white-washed walls in the floor she leaned back to as far as she could without toppling over and sent her own skull crashing into oblivion as it cracked like an old rotten bloody egg spilling its contents over the wall and down on to the raw wooden floor which hungrily soaked up the blood.

MOTHER KNOWS BEST

"For crying out loud get your bloody hair cut will yer!" Mandy yelled at her son furiously as he stumbled downstairs, his sore feet still paying the price of last night's foot stomping partying!

"Eh? What?" He tried to reply as his swirling brain attempted to put together a half-baked sentence.

"Your hair! Its a bloody disgrace! Your whole appearance is a bloody disgrace!" seethed his mother vehemently while her beady eyes scornfully surveyed the dishevelled heap in front of her who embarrassingly called her mother.

"Gimme a break mum! I've been out all night!" pleaded her son Jack.

"I can bloody see that and I suppose you're gonna be asleep all day after you've eaten your bloody food!" his mother rattled on.

Jack's eyes lit up with anticipation the moment that single word 'food' was mentioned. It was possibly the only word able to drag him from the world of nod into the land of the awake (the only other word able to accomplish such a feat being the word 'sex' of course!).

"Wot you got cooking mum I'm starved!" He begged as he hammed up the 'I'm your son and hungry routine' to the limit! Which he hoped would play on whatever remained of his mother's maternal instincts.

"There'll be nothing for you in the future young man if you don't clean up your act as she pulled out of the oven a feast fit to make the eyes gape and mouth water in anticipation.

"Corrrr! Ta mum!" Jack exclaimed as he surveyed the sumptuous fry-up feast that his dear mum had whipped up for him.

"You're the best mum! Jack exclaimed excitedly as he picked up his knife and fork and went to work hungrily on the greasy spread laid out before him as if he were a bulldozer demolishing a building .

"Chew properly or you'll bloody choke on it!" nagged his mother in her usual shrill glass-shattering voice.

But Jack was a hardened war-weary veteran of his mother's nagging and her needle- like words failed to penetrate his brain and merely rolled off him like water off a duck's back.

"Don't you ever listen to me?" asked his mother exasperated.

"Yeah mum of course I do!" Jack reassured her deceitfully. He was now such a skilled specialist in being nagged by his mother that he knew more or less what she would say, how she would say it and when she would pause to check that he was listening. Which of course would be the just the right time to assure her that he was still her dutiful caring , loving (if ever so slightly dirty) son. How easy all women were fooled and that number even included his dear mum.

Mandy let out a long sigh and allowed herself a satisfied smile as she gazed at Jack tucking into the fruits of her labour. She felt tears well up in her eyes as she thought of her dear son leaving home, leaving her all alone. Even though she nagged him she did love him and deep inside she hoped that he would always stay with her. No matter how old he was she would always see him as her little baby!

She look satisfied down at her son as he devoured the food. At least he made sure that nothing went to waste, no matter how full the plate she could rely on him to wipe it clean 'He does a better job than a dishwasher'. She thought as she chuckled softly.

Jack polished off the plate to a gleaming shine and leaned back his stomach full and his mind empty of everything except for the need to sleep as he did after each of his mother's legendary fry-ups! He tried to get up so that he could stumble back up to the sanctuary of his room but he his body refused to obey his mind and he fell into a deep slumber.

When he managed to force his eyelids open he was greeted by the familiar sight of his room's sky blue wall paper soiled by grime due his lack of cleanliness and the fact that his mother treated his room it as a no go zone for cleaning.

He tried to move but couldn't then realised to his embarrassment that his shirt and trousers had been removed. Panic invaded his mind as he tried to get up but couldn't ! Why couldn't he get up?

Jack swung his head rapidly from side to side and as his senses slowly returned to him realised that both his hands were tied!

"MUM! MUM!" Jack cried out frantically , he didn't have to call for long. The door opened and a familiar figure appeared

"MUM! WHAT'S THE HELL GOING ON?" he yelled.

"Now! Now! My little baby shouldn't be using language like that!" chided his mother with an unnervingly calm tone that was so unusual for her.

"WHAT YER TALKING ABOUT? GET ME OUT OF THIS!" Jack bellowed while straining at his bonds .

"In a minute my baby I promise in a minute!" His mother continued in her same deathly calm fashion

"WHAT ARE YER DOING?" Jack shrieked out panic-stricken.

"Its gonna be alright baby! Mother's gonna make everything alright" she continued unfazed as she approached her son with a strange smile on her face.
In his mind Jack struggled in his mind to find a logical explanation for what was happening perhaps it was all a big sick joke or better still some sick Freudian dream from which he would soon awaken from. Yes that was it! It was all just a dream., a nightmarish and realistic dream no doubt about it but still a dream nonetheless.

But what happened next totally destroyed that delusion when his mother (if that was what she really was!) quickly pulled the pillow from under his head and placed it firm over his face.

Jack tried to gasp for breath but couldn't, he tried to raise his hands to free himself from the grip of this dark angel. Above his own muffled cries for help he could hear the sound of his mother as she sung a lullaby as his own internal organs contorted and his body convulsed crying out for the breath of life.

"Rock a bye baby on a tree top-" he thought he heard but like his consciousness the words fell into a dark eternal void, a void which Jack felt his soul slipping into as well
He tried vainly to crawl his way back into full consciousness but felt himself being drawn into the beckoning night that surrounded him.

Jack's hands fell limply to his side and his mother took out her watch and carefully timed 120 seconds she then removed the pillow and put her head to his chest a tense look on her face a look that turned to one of relief as she heard the sound of his heart beating.

"Darling wake up darling! Mummy's here!" pleaded his mother while slapping him gently.

Jack's eyes slowly opened and an idiotic smile spread across his face

"How's my little boy doing?" mummy enquired as she offered her

baby a rattle. Jack's oxygen starved damaged brain responded with childish delight as his mummy waved the rattle in front of him. Jack raised his hands in order to grab it and shouted out at her for him for him to be given it!

"Goo! Ga! Goo! Goo! Jack spluttered out to his mummy who laughed in a frenzied manner her little baby had come back to her!

"Here you are darling if you want it then take it!" offered his mummy.

Jack snatched the rattle and started shaking it frantically his eyes wide open with genuine amazement! While he played happily he didn't notice as his mummy started to carefully shave his head. Jack's mummy looked contented as she saw her baby's dirty curls floating down to the floor. He would look a lot better with a shaved head his mummy thought after all - Mother knows best!

HARVEY HEAD BANGER

5 o'clock brought with it a release from another hum-drum day for Harvey. It had been another stifling hot day with the supposed 'state-of-the-art' air conditioning yet again failing and despite several frantic calls to maintenance it still lay idle.

Harvey contemplated giving them one last chance before complaining to the owners of the building, but as soon as he picked up the sweat covered receiver he decided to damn it all to hell and slammed it down. He only did that crap during office hours when he was paid for it not on his own precious time.

Everyone else was making a beeline to the pub for the usual drink and smoke with his work acquaintances . He always applied the words work acquaintances rather than colleagues or friends which he considered much too a familiar title, he merely socialised with them because it was the done thing not because he really wanted to.

After all they did all work for a sales company and each of these people that he laughed with and discussed everyday issues which were in fact his bitter rivals each competing for a share of the diminishing number of customers out there. Quite simply each sale they made meant one less sale that he would make and Harvey was not so generous a person as to welcome bread being taken out of his mouth!

He allowed himself a goodbye glance at the cramped cubicle formed of 3 drab grey partitions that went to make his luxurious

penthouse office!!!

Sometimes it was a thorn in his side that his goodbye glances to his working way of life at the end of each day was just an "au-revoir" -a simple see you later goodbye instead of a fully fledged goodbye for ever but then that was what life was partly all about, wishing for things that you haven't got and most probably will never have . It was a condition unique to humans the fact that they needed to have a purpose for their existence! Having hopes and wishes to strive for neatly fulfilled that need!

He contemplated that as soon as he entered that office at the start of the day till when he finished work the only direct contact that he had with people in the outside world was through the disembodied voices of the potential customers on his telesales marketing calling list. But he didn't even view them as being people, not real people at least but merely as the next monthly ever-growing mortgage payment on his flat or perhaps an initial deposit on a luxury car.

But all that was a world that he could leave behind him now for the next 16 hours. It was time for him to enter another world, a world of smoking drinking ,mixed in with crude and rude conversation.

Harvey joined the stampede of the general throng as everyone careered towards the building's exit doors with the enthusiasm of prisoners on day release from their jails.

He tried to spot any members of his usual pub partners but their faces were buried beneath the rest of the rabble so he dived deeper into the work-weary crowds that were fleeing their offices. He weaved skilfully around the bobbing faces that blocked his way as if he were a motorcycle dodging in and out of rush hour traffic on a motorway.

Soon Harvey had overtaken a large number of people and was amongst the first to step out into the cool evening, stood for a moment and savoured the refreshing air. He took a deep breath and after the rarefied air of the office felt giddy, as this outdoors oxygen-rich air spread vigour and well-being all over his body while also bringing new life to his tired muscles. Even though he was surrounded by heavy traffic belching out pollution, it still tasted and felt better than the stale hot gas inside the office that tried to pass itself off as being breathable!

Feeling regenerated Harvey made his way energetically down the street to his usual watering hole. Goodness knows he needed a drink after another usually tense day, but this day had been somehow unusually nerve-racking there had been some worry deeply hidden in the recesses of his subconscious mind which was trying to force its way out and make itself known to his conscious mind! So far it had failed, but its attempts had been with him all day. Even now with him away from the tension and rush of the office when his mind should be less cluttered and things should

be easier to remember Harvey still couldn't put his finger on what made this day so significant.

'It had to be something! What the hell was it?' He mulled this burning question over in his mind. The question seemed to rebound of each of the brain cells inhabiting his grey matter and each time receiving no answer sending it floating to the next memory cell in the hope of solving the mystery of this overtly persistent puzzle.

But Harvey didn't have to travel far before he found the solution- right in front of him!
Staring right at him was an imposingly sized bill-board which shouted at him in bold red block letters.- "THE GOVERNMENT MAKES TRADING STANDARDS YOU KEEP THEM OR ELSE!"

That one statement flung Harvey's mind back 12 months earlier to a certain phone call to a certain name on a certain telesales list, during a desperate time when he had been perilously at an all time low-sales wise for a particular week and had been in dire need of some investors for a high risk financial plan that they had been marketing intensely. His back had been up against the wall and he knew that he would have been taking enforced permanent leave if his sales figures didn't improve.

Looking back it had seemed such a tiny misdemeanour in the beginning, telling a little lie here and another lie there to anyone prepared to listen, in order to sweeten the bitter pill of this very shaky investment venture which would most probably result in

any gullible or greedy investors that were drawn in losing all their money and maybe more!

"Take 'em for all they've got then take 'em for all that the rest of their family have bloody got-the greedy bastards deserve it! sounded off his MD and Harvey had taken his words to heart. One deceit had led to a larger deceit and that one had led to numerous other deceits and those deceits in turn had spawned even more deceits till he had woven a web that he was in danger of being tangled in each time he spoke to a potential clients (or were they really gullible losers!) unless he remembered all the other lies that he had told all the other clients previously.

He couldn't begin to even hope to list all the falsehoods that he had thrown at these unsuspecting people. He had lied about :- expected returns; initial investment; rate of return; expected time needed for that return! He had lied about well-known people who had endorsed the plan; testimonials from people who had tried the plan. All in all his whole telesales pitch had amounted to fraud itself but fear for the consequences of such a reckless action had been superseded by other greater fears -fear of loosing his job, fear of failure, these strong emotions had swept any sense of fairness or morale code that he might have previously had in conjunction with his profession!

He had by then long stopped seeing them as human beings like himself with emotions, ambitions, hopes and fears who were in some cases putting their life savings into this investment plan! Instead he viewed them more like numbers on a weekly sales figure list where they would appear as 1 unit=x amount of

investment. He had blinded himself to the hard work behind their investments and the fact that some of them weren't trying to make money for themselves but for their children to try and give them a better life then the one that they had been forced to cope with.

The only thing that he allowed himself to see was just the signed agreements and cheques that they sent in, signatures full of hope which they had thought was signing themselves up for a better future when all they were doing was just signing away what wealth they had.

He had received promotion, a huge bonus and a slap on the back from the MD for his hard work.
But there had been a cost to pay for this false success , the true cost was borne by the investors when the venture inevitably collapsed leaving shattered dreams and despair in its wake , the agreements that they had signed made any legal action worthless!

There had been of course the angry letters, the tearful phone calls but all these had fallen on non-compassionate ears and a general attitude of conceitedness which dared each of the investors to attempt an expensive legal action, a legal action which they knew they couldn't afford and which the company knew they would definitely loose.

Harvey had continuously pushed to the back of his mind to the fact that he climbed the slippery ladder of success by treading over the dead hopes of ordinary people by telling himself that was life and that simply was that. He even rather perversely

starting to believe a deeply flawed theory that a little fraud was a good thing to help circulate the money in the economy from all those who would simply save and keep their savings locked up in the bank, hoarding it all away and therefore stopping the economy from entering an economic boom!

It was only a matter of time before all these lies that he had invented to please his conscience were blown away in a fleeting moment like dust is in the air and blown away they were in a most direct and brutal manner.

Harvey didn't usually buy an evening paper but while passing a newspaper stand a headline on one of the displayed newspaper caught his eye- "DAD KILLS FAMILY THEN HIMSELF!" The whole tragedy and shock of the crime drew Harvey's attention and he paused for a second to quickly skim through the small print under the headline. It was a fateful decision which he regretted- he didn't even need to read it all , as soon as he saw the person's name, the financial plan that he had invested in and the fact that the father had been suffering from depression caused by money problems his stomach churned over and his numbed thinking processes ground to a halt.

He couldn't read anymore and turned away sickened. The full horror of realising what he was at least partially to blame for was just starting to dawn on him . He realised that he had not only trodden on dead hopes but also dead bodies in order to move up.

For the rest of that evening he had been in a state of shock and repentance for what he had done but time is a great healer and all

this had occurred a year ago today. Since then he had invented excuses to pardon his behaviour and reasons why no matter what he had done the dad was obviously mentally unstable and would have carried out his murderous massacre even if he had not managed to entice him into the disastrous venture.

Very soon Harvey was back to his old cold calculating , 'take no prisoners!' Self . After all the world kept turning and him feeling guilty would not help his company, the people who had been killed but above all it especially wouldn't help himself!

So Harvey choose to forget it all and get on with the hectic business of life which up until a moment ago he had been successfully and happily been doing. All that had changed in a flash and with the floodgates to his conscience lifted guilt and sorrow came cascading like a tidal wave over him which was intent on drowning him in self pity and remorse.

He needed a drink to help him drown his sorrows before they drowned him , his need was such that he couldn't wait till he got to his usual pub and on spying a pub a little way up a nearby side road hurriedly made his way to it his brain screaming out for some guilt-lifting refreshment.

As he rapidly neared the pub he saw that it looked like one of those well preserved Old Victorian England pubs. Even in the dying evening light it was apparent that the masonry had been scrubbed to a snowy white colour!

Harvey had by now reached the antique oak entrance pub door,

he was impressed by the great care and attention taken to give it a polished deep shine in which Harvey could see his own reflection in. Through the large sparkling clean glazed window panes on either side of the door. Harvey could see the jagged silhouettes of the drinkers surrounded by a warm beckoning light and hear the sounds of people happily chatting interspersed with the raucous sounds of the odd tipsy drinker laughing in an over the top fashion undoubtedly at some rude joke.

Harvey could have kicked himself for not passing this way before and discovering this oasis sooner. It really was a crime that such a gem of a pub had been overlooked for so long! Without further hesitation Harvey pulled the door open and wasn't disappointed by what he found! -a cheerful crowd of drinkers with everyone either laughing or smiling!

Harvey marched quickly up to who he presumed was the owner of the pub the - a middle-aged looking balding man standing behind the bar with a friendly familiar tone to his voice which made Harvey feel that he had known him forever.

"Good Evening Sir and what can I get for you?" he enquired pleasantly while drying a beer glass with a red-striped tea towel

"A pint of your best bitter please!" replied Harvey eagerly.

"Coming right up Sir!" the bartender shot back quickly as he grabbed a glass and proceeded to fill it with the black nectar. Harvey couldn't help notice the care being taken by the publican for as soon as the pint glass was filled to the rim he waited a

minute for the white frothy head to settle before filling the glass up some more in order to make sure that the black liquid body of the pint went right up to the brim with the white frothy head sitting on top like a sponge cake.

That will be £1!" stated the bartender as he placed the pint in front of Harvey who was pleasantly pleased by the price.

"Don't you believe in price rises?" he joked.

"Not if we can help it Sir!" chirped cheerfully the publican. "By the way Sir" he added in a more serious tone "Sorry about the delay in pouring your pint - trading Standards and all that Sir. I couldn't afford to loose by license by not giving g you a full pint of beer-you could be an inspector for all I know!" He concluded jokily.

"That's the last thing I would want to be I'm telling you friend!" Harvey retorted. "As for bloody trading standards! Don't talk to me about bloody Trading Standards! I've bloody Trading Standards to last me a lifetime!" Harvey rattled on angrily.

The publican nodded knowingly in agreement while a grateful Harvey took the pint and gulped it down ferociously anxious for the alcohol to do its job and make him forget his previous wrong doing or at least to distance his conscience from the pain that he had caused.

Harvey suddenly felt giddy and euphoric simultaneously which was not surprising after such a sudden intake of intoxicating

liquor. He gripped the bar to steady himself as everything around him dissolved into wavy strands like a dream sequence from a movie.

"Now that's what I call pint!" exclaimed Harvey

Glad you enjoyed that sir !" interjected the publican his smile never leaving his face.
"I think I've got something here that you'll find a whole new experience!" the publican continued excitedly. "We're trying out a new line in cocktails -try this one on the house. We call it a headbanger !" . He proclaimed proudly as he presented a glass containing a bizarre looking green looking concoction. "Don't be put off by the sight of it that's just artificial colouring!" reassured the publican.

Never the one to turn down anything free Harvey didn't need to be made the same offer twice and taking a deep breath gulped the liquid down in one go. The elixir dripped into his stomach like a stone then shot up again like a rocket making him feel that he was raised 2 feet off the ground which gave him a wonderful light-headed feeling!

"WHHOOOAA !" yelled out Harvey delighted "great stuff I can see why you call them headbangers!"

He looked up at the Publican who for strange reason wasn't smiling now, in fact a deathly silence had descended in the pub! Harvey turned round to see just three familiar people staring at him! Who in one great chorus they let out an anguished scream .

Harvey recognised those faces and turned round to face the publican whose voice thundered inside his head" Remember me Harvey?" Harvey recognised that voice and dread filled his soul!

"We keep to trading standards here Harvey everything means what is it called-look in the mirror! " the coldly familiar voice continued while eerily the publican's mouth stayed closed. Too shocked to talk Harvey swung round just in time to see the roof of his skull fly up to the ceiling unravelling his brain as it did so as if they were strands of spaghetti cooked in blood. That was the last thing Harvey saw before his eyeballs exploded showering puss over the dirty old floor but the last thing Harvey felt was the rest of his skull shattering like pieces of glass spilling the remainder of his brains over the floor .

Outside the decrepit and deserted pub a worn-out FOR SALE sign flapped lifelessly in the wind. Since the untimely death of the owner (who had committed suicide after murdering his family) no one had come forward to buy the repossessed property and chances being nobody would. Meanwhile inside rats gathered and swayed drunkenly as they feasted on an unexpected but welcome banquet containing one main course -Harvey's brain.

HORROR STRIP

"Where's that bloody cartoon!!" bellowed the Editor down the phone at Nick.

"Whaaaat?" Nick tried to reply, his eyes still bleary from the previous late night's partying.

"The cartoon! The bloody cartoon Nick! We go to press at 3am tomorrow it should have been in 2 bloody days ago!!! You know how the damn Copy department always give me grief each time you bloody well chuck your work at them 5 seconds before we're supposed to go to press!!!" his editor blazed on enraged.

"What ??? 5 seconds boss!!!" exclaimed Nick "Its never less than 10!!!" he joked in an attempt to defuse his editor's rage with some well tried and not very well tested humour. The attempt failed miserably with this mistimed and pathetic joke falling flat on its face as well as blowing up in his face with his boss's continuing rage being the explosion!

"Don't get bloody smart with me this is your last chance. I've given you've too many chances, too much rope to do exactly what you want to do in the way that you want to do it ! Well the line gets drawn here and now! If you don't come in with it by 12am midnight then don't bother coming in at all. We'll see how smart you are with no job and no bloody prospects!" his Editor whined on without a pause for breath.

"Don't worry boss I won't let you down!" Nick replied

compliantly now trying to play the role of obedient employee in an attempt to placate his slave-master of a boss.

"You damn well better not or there'll be hell to pay!" The editor barked back.

The phone line suddenly went dead. Nick figured that by the sound of it the boss must have slammed it down with the force of a battering ram! By now he would be filling the air around him with verbal obscenities turning it deep blue as well as turning the cheeks of sweet Sophie his personal secretary red with embarrassment. Nick supposed that the poor innocent girl with her strict catholic upbringing must have wondered if her boss had been sent to test her and how much longer she could stand working for a boss so heathen!

Nick reclined back onto his bed and tried to resist the temptation to close his eyes and drift away to dreamland. Mustering all his energy reserves he just managed to rouse himself just before clouds started to close in over his consciousness and forced himself up to face the daily routine of his work. Struggling sluggishly like a drunkard blind man he floundered into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of cold jet -black coffee, as he gulped it down the caffeine shot straight from his stomach to his head like a lightening bolt!

"Just what I needed" he thought, temporarily vitalized.

Nick knew that this time his boss would be make good on his threats and show him no mercy if messed up. He had better get

his act together and get his cartoon strip finished -early!

Nick glanced over to his neglected drawing board in the lounge and his heart sank with sadness and shock as his gaze fell on the white blank piece of drawing paper hanging on it .

He wasn't exactly sure why he should be so shocked to see it devoid of any work after all he was the guy supposed to be doing the drawing, some titanicly-sized hand was not going to reach down out of heaven and do it for him as his Art teacher at High school would frequently tell him!

He paused for a second in the vain hope that something- some miracle would happen but nothing of course did! As usual it was going to be up to his own resolve to try and find the reserves of artistic energy in order to be able to commit something to paper.

It was at times like these that Nick often sympathized with an traveling salesman who after all had to make a living everyday by tapping into a potential market that was hopefully out there. Nick also saw himself as trying to make a living everyday , but this time instead of relying on other people. He had to rely on himself and the artistic potential of his own mind. It was a psychological chore that had lately started to overly burden his mind for no apparent reason.-

Without warning Nick was jolted out of his self-pitying mood by an irritating sound that was starting to torment more and more with each passing second. It was the sound of scratching but not just any scratching, it was a particular type of scratching that was

very familiar to him. What the hell was it? The answer was on the tip of his tongue. The scratching grew louder , ever tormenting and ever familiar, at last the answer came to the surface of his mind !-It was the sound of pencil on paper and judging by the intensity of it the mystery artist was having more success than he was having.

One thing that did puzzle Nick though was that he had thought that he knew the interests, occupations and habits of all his neighbours . Obviously someone's hidden talent had escaped his attention, one of his neighbours either an elderly couple or a retired train driver was a budding artist who had seemed to have come into full bloom, whether or not the fruits of their labour would bear any relation to the amount of work they seemed to be putting into it could be quite a different matter.

Nick felt the deep claws of envy gripping his mind-Why was it that so many people with traditional mainstream artistic tastes seemed to find it so easy to express their thoughts on paper whether that be in drawing, writing or sculpting. While he on the other hand had to rack his brain from pillar to post as if it were a shuttlecock being pummelled back and forth from side to side.

He found himself slipping into the abyss of depression and went back into the bathroom to get his dose of Anti-depressant tablets that he was under strict orders to take every 6 hours.

He opened up the bathroom cabinet thrust his hand in and found himself grabbing at an empty space, they weren't bloody there! Seeds of panic started to seize his mind as the repercussions of

their disappearance hit home. He wouldn't be able to get some more tablets till early morning, but this was an emergency he was due to take them now ! RIGHT NOW!

'Think straight !Think straight !'Nick ordered himself mentally. First he would check to see if there was a real emergency in the first place. It might be that he had carelessly dropped them and then flung something like a chair cushion or some item of clothing over them. Not only would that have been unspeakably stupid, it would have been almost as ridiculous as throwing it in the rubbish bin! THE RUBBISH BIN! Surely not! Nick quickly grabbed the half-empty bin as if he was grabbing a juvenile villain by the scruff of the neck. He turned it upside down emptying the stinking contents of rotting food and used up cartons all over the floor, but after 15 minutes rummaging through it he realised that it was a lost cause to continue looking there for his medication.

He looked round frantically. He had to find those tablets pills they were his link with the sane natural world and they were what kept him in it. Nick looked upon those pills in an almost religious fashion , viewing them as his umbilical cord that held his body and soul together! Without them his mind was in danger of falling apart like a pack of cards caught by a mild draft, whatever happened as a result of that was not going to be pretty!

All the world's nurses and all the world's shrinks would not be able to put his mind back together again and would be doomed to eternal failure just like in the nursery rhyme Humpty-Dumpty where all the king's horses and all the king's men had failed to put

Humpty Dumpty back together again!

In a vain self-preservation mechanism Nick tried to quench his panic with half-hearted humour when the thought streaked across his mind' I'll bet I'll find those bloody pills in the nick of time!' But depression had by now moved across Nick's mind like a cloud of darkness sailing across stormy skies, he knew that worrying about his state of mind could only make matters worse but he was powerless to prevent himself crashing deeper and deeper into a hole that there was no hope of ever getting out off. He had even stopped looking for his mind saving pills-'After all what good could they do for him now? Except prolong the agony of hopelessness that he was experiencing at the moment and stretch it into infinity' his incoherent and logically-drained brain surmised.

Although he had not noticed it the scratching sound was growing ever louder filling up every cubic squared feet of air around him but he had even stopped caring about that now and his sense of worthlessness and failure had long numbed his sense of inquisitiveness. Growing deep inside of him like a demon seed he felt the overwhelming need to put himself out of his own misery like a terminally ill dog needing to be put to sleep-forever.

With tears meandering down his face he struggled into the bathroom and taking out one of his barber razors made a sharp clean deep cut across his throat, at least there was one thing that he was not going to fail in-his own suicide. He tried to view his own handiwork in the cracked bathroom cabinet mirror but blood sprayed out of his severed artery plastering it in his own life. Nick

felt his knees giving way and found him helplessly collapsing into a heap and into oblivion...

Paul proudly scribbled out the words THE END with his stubby pencil at the bottom of what he considered to be a literary work of art. He allowed himself the luxury of reclining back in his leather-bound writer's chair and broke into a satisfied grin . He had laboured so long and so hard over this novel that it had seemed at times he could imagine the characters beside him with real flesh , blood and feelings!

Recalling a chapter from one of the many books about psychic phenomenal that he had read he had come across the almost unbelievable case histories of people managing to give characters inhabiting their imagination real physical substance merely by concentrating hard enough. He felt that he had almost accomplished that here! He had drank , eaten and breathed this novel for the last 2 years and had sometimes almost believed that he could touch , feel and sense the main characters in this artificial world that he had created. But that was now all in the past he put away the pencil that he had been nosily scratching away with and let out a sigh of relief and satisfaction .

Suddenly for no reason at all doubts started to flood into his mind small nagging fears in themselves but together they were like a barbaric army that filled Paul's mind with irrevocable dread.

' What if the whole thing was a failure and the past 2 years had been a waste? Was it really as good as he thought it was ? Would he be able to live with failure and rejection? Would he have the

strength to go on?' He thought bewildered and reeling from his own self doubts.

Despite the growing crescendo of the swirling mass of confusion swarming over all his mind. Paul could swear he could make out the very faint sound of scratching similar to that of a person writing on paper…

SWEET CRAVINGS

Sindy naughtily popped some more boiled sweets into her mouth and allowed them to sit there momentarily on her tongue while her saliva did the job of partially dissolving the sugar casing into a thick syrup which seeped over her taste buds sending a rush of exhilaration to her head. Her self control though was not infinite and she finally had to succumb to the temptation of crunching down hard on them shattering them into sugary shards which were sent flying to the four corners of her 7 year old mouth.

She simply loved the way each of these fragments slipped about on her tongue on the syrupy coating as if they were puppet skaters on ice controlled by her tongue and mouth.

"SINDY! ARE YOU EATING SWEETS AGAIN?" bellowed her ever watchful mother.

"NO OF COURSE NOT MUM!" Sindy bellowed back deceitfully while trying to stop the tell-tale evidence from popping out of her mouth. Her bulging cheeks underlining her deceitfulness as well as detracting from her seemingly innocent persona.

"You better not be!" her mother thundered on. "You know that all that sugar will rot your teeth to their stumps you'll need dentures before you're 18!!!

Sindy struggled to reply as she crunched away at the incriminating

evidence but could only let out a faint 'hmmmm.' in recognition and agreement over what her mother had lectured to her.

Sindy had always had a sweet tooth, a problem that Sindy personally blamed on her mother, who while she had been pregnant with Sindy had developed an unnatural craving for sugar cubes- something that Sindy's mother aggressively denied but which Sindy's grandmother equally aggressively confirmed.

During her pregnancy she liked nothing better than scooping up a handful of sugar cubes like a mechanical digger and jamming them into her mouth like gob-stoppers. Then using her teeth as if they were a row of miniature guillotines she would bring them down on the hapless cubes chopping, grinding and shattering them into fine white powder, just before her tongue mercilessly threw their remains to their utter destruction down to her stomach where her acid gastric juices finished them off. But her unborn child had also shared this glucose feast and had instantly felt the sudden surge of energy which made her kick at the inside wall of her mother's womb.

Since that time Sindy had been doomed to a life of expecting and wanting all her food to be as sweet as the highs experienced inside her mother's womb due to her mother's sugar cube binges. Her mother naturally felt guilt and responsibility for her dear daughter's plight and at first obliged at every opportunity to satisfy Sindy's need for sweets and chocolate.

Eventually though common sense had at last seen the light of day and she had hardened herself to the vocal yearnings of her daughters sweets craving, realising like every good parent eventually does that in order to be very kind in the long term , you have to be a little cruel in the short -term. This had resulted in the policy of her rationing Sindy's supply and consumption of confectionery with the long term objective of saving her teeth as well as her health.

Sadly by that time the mould had been cast and Sindy's addiction to sugar had become deeply rooted in her body, the result being that she had quickly felt a barrier built out of her resentment come between her and her once dear mother. She just couldn't understand her own mother's lack of understanding. Didn't she realise that sweets were no occasional luxury to her but instead were to her as essential as bread is to the average person's staple diet.

Although Sindy was too young to understand the concept and see it in herself she had in fact become a sweet junkie! Living in dire need of her next glucose fix when she would gorge herself on anything that consisted mostly of sugar. By raiding the larder discreetly (usually at night!) she had her own little stashes of solidified nectar hidden in various strategic points around the home none which would be easily discovered by her mother but which in contrast could be uncovered in a moment of time by the cunning Sindy whether that be from under an armchair seat or from under the carpet in a certain room corner.

She had become the expert in playing a game of eat and seek with her mother who always suspected that that her daughter was munching away on something less than wholesome but somehow hadn't developed a high level of talent in catching her daughter in the act , this was of course in direct contrast to Sindy whose talent for hiding and eating her little stashes of pleasure far surpassed and dwarfed her mother's detective skills. It was a talent that she was putting to full use right this very moment while her mother lovingly prepared her daughter a healthy and nourishing meal.

Sindy extracted the last of the syrupy sugar from the dissolved sweets before licking her lips in the hope of mopping up any left over residue of the sugar that might have nestled itself in the wrinkles of crevices that ran up and down her thick lips. She finished just in time.

"SINDY!!" summoned her mother almost on cue. "DINNER'S READY!!"

"COMING MUM" Sindy called back, while springing up quickly - too quickly she realised when she felt a sharp pain in her thumb and found to her terror and shock that she had sliced open the top part of her thumb possibly on some unseen wood splinter or perhaps a nail not driven in properly by the builders who had done some work for them last summer (her mother had strangely called them cowboy builders why was that weren't the Cowboys always the goodies in the films??).

If she had known any swear words she would have surely have used them but being only 7 and with very limited access to the television she knew none. In this modern world Sindy was one of those lucky children who had retained some ignorance about the big bad outside world so instead she had to content herself with a cry of frustration and despair as she gripped her wound tightly in a vain attempt to stem the copious flow of blood.

Sindy pretended to be brave and gulped back the urge to bawl out in pain and tears. Her pretending lasted till she got to the top of the stairs when her strength failed and the tears forced their way through her resolve and will- power like water through a concrete dam dissolving a way for a torrent to follow .

"Silly girl!" chided Sindy's mother gently as she held Sindy's wounded thumb under some cold running water.

"AWWW!" whined Sindy as the freezing water seemed to fire a wasp sting into the cut that shot right down the whole length of her throbbing thumb.

"Hold still!" ordered her mother like that of an army drill sergeant. At last Sindy's mother shifted Sindy's bleeding thumb out of the waterfall that was showering it. Her thumb emerged glistening clean from its cold water bath, which her mother quickly patted dry with a wad of soft white tissue.

Exhibiting a skill that can only be mastered through practice . Sindy's mother quickly reached out with one hand (while the other still gripped her child's thumb) and grabbed a packet of

plasters then with the same hand her fingers nimbly flipped the packet top open and found a medium -sized fabric plaster which she plucked from the multitude of other multi-shaped plasters that pressed and crowded around it- all with one hand! A feat that Sindy never ceased to be amazed of.

Then to top it all - and this was the most skilful part of her mother's almost acrobatic feat, using that same hand she pulled the backing plastic of the plaster to expose its stickiness then as not to diminish its adhesiveness held it aloft by 2 of her fingers pinching it lightly at the very top of it.

"Soon be done Darling" cooed Sindy's mother in a comforting manner.

Sindy nodded stiffly and grimaced while trying her utmost not to cry , after all she was a big girl now or so her ever watchful mother kept trying to hammer through her skull and into her brain. Now was as good a time as any to try and put what she had been told into practice.

But despite having the strongest will of any 7 year old that she knew in the world her thumb spurred her on to vent her pain in quiet abrupt sobs.

"Cry baby!" mocked her mother jokily as she efficiently slid the plaster round the open thumb wound which was by now encased in a layer of congealed clotted blood which Sindy curiously thought resembled red cherry cream.

"There! All done" she concluded with a sigh of relief.

"But it still hurts mummy!" Sindy moaned reproachfully half - expecting some miracle from her mother that would banish all the pain away in a single gesture. After all nothing was impossible for adults was it?

"Don't worry Darling! The pain will be all gone in the morning I promise" reassured her mother which though not stopping the pain made Sindy feel better inside instantly.

Feeling somewhat drained from her wound in her gradually numbing thumb Sindy sat down to tea. The food that her mother placed before her looked bland and uninteresting -all green (a colour that she found repulsive anyway!) apart from a corner of it that looked a rather black-browney burnt colour. This unappetising combination inevitably resulted in Sindy picking a morsel here and there from it in a half-hearted attempt to consume a vast portion of the meal. Finally she gave up and resignedly flung her knife and fork down with a large clang.

"Have you been eating those sweets again?" scowled her mother as she inspected the 90% full plate.

"NO MUM!" Sindy protested in her most pretentiously 'how-you- could-even - think-such-a thing-voice' her tone brimming with feigned offence while her eyes wide open also exclaimed her innocence of the accusation and enhanced the ruse.

"No???" a questioning frown quickly spread like wildfire across

her mother's furrowed face made weary by years of worrying .

"Yeah mum I'm sure" repeated Sindy in an Oscar winning performance as seemingly as shocked as she was before.

"Then what do you call this then my girl?" and with all the self-confidence of a lawyer delivering a winning argument in a tour de force manner Sindy's mother triumphantly held up a bag - containing Sindy's chief cache of sweets - a catastrophe!!

"How do you explain this then ?" she smiled gleefully as she gently swung the booty from side to side like a pendulum.

"Well um ..uh.." Sindy stumbled and staggered over her words as she desperately sought to find some lie that would exonerate her from her mother's charges as well as explain away the evidence that her mother swung before her eyes which her eyes followed hungrily as if in a some hypnotic trance.

NO EXCUSES AND NO MORE LIES!!" snapped her mother like a shark. " I've warned you enough times!" She bombarded as she ominously stopped swinging the bag and started to stretch the hand holding it over to the.....BIN!

"MUM NO!!!!" cried out Sindy in desperation as she made a grab for the little bag of pleasure but the short arms and small stature of a 7 year old betrayed her effort and were of no match against that of an adult especially a determined one such as her mother! Who without hesitation, remorse or pity poured the bag's contents into the smelly garbage bin to accompany the dirt and decaying food

already in there.

For a moment and only for a moment Sindy seriously considered concocting some plan to sneak back into the kitchen at night but then she remembered that the sweets had no wrappers on them. ! That fact totally demolished her plan as even Sindy with her sweet tooth didn't feel fired -up about consuming tainted and dirty sweets -they wouldn't give her any enjoyment only stomach ache she concluded!

"Now get upstairs to your bedroom! No TV this evening for you!" thundered her mother in a merciless voice that Sindy knew better than to argue with.

Sindy hung her head in shame at being caught and in sadness at deprived of her whole store of sweets. What was she to do? She needed something sweet! Dragging her feet heavily as if they encased in concrete blocks , Sindy made her way up to her room collapsed onto the bed her foot muscles crying out for release from their labours.

Sindy sank heavily into the bed and stared vacantly up at the white ceiling illuminated in the middle by a bright bulb that glowed white hot in a floral cloth shade cocoon. Sindy sighed deeply, relaxed her muscles and sank deeper into the single child size bed, which seemed to mirror her own sinking hopes and feelings.

Her tongue subconsciously sucked at a sweet in her mouth that wasn't there while her mind tried to think of some other secret

sweet store that she might have forgotten about but none sprang to mind .

Her thumb had started to throb more painfully than ever as a result of her run in with her mother. Instinctively she took her thumb and placed it in her mouth it felt comforting somehow and reminded her of a time when the world had seemed a much smaller and safer place.

Without a moment's thought she began to suck lightly that was until she tasted something - something sweet and thick. It was the blood from her cut thumb! The viscous liquid felt warm and soothing as it travelled down her throat. It gave her a light heady feeling that made her feel pleasantly drowsy. Sindy's baby instincts resurfaced and even as she drifted off into a long and peaceful slumber her mouth still worked away on her thumb.

Sindy was buried a week later. Her grieving mother would have buried Sindy sooner if not for the autopsy that was carried out due to the suspicious circumstances surrounding her death but all that did was deepen the mystery over how a little girl's blood could be drained out of veins and arteries and into her stomach!

SILENT SCREAM

Claude woke up in a state of waking death, but to say the term wake up was far too euphemistic and mild a term for he had only by sheer force of will dragged his subconscious mind from the deadly nightmare that had been inflicted on him and propelled it into the conscious but even now he still felt as dead as he had in his slumbering madness.

His muscles and the sinews that gave them power cried out for release from the tenseness and that they were acting out. While Claude's heart and its arteries threatened to explode with the abnormal amount of adrenaline cruising through them.

Claude tried to sit up but the muscles that he needed to carry out this mundane task didn't even twitch! He contented himself with laying very still to give his muscles time to unwind into a state of relaxation.

Since he was a child he had wrestled the demons in his head every night which he would nearly succumb to every night. His mind felt so numb due to the control, that he had tried to exert in his nightmare that even thinking seemed to require a super human effort.

In vain Claude tried to piece to either the sequences of events to try and make sense of them in some fashion or other but he couldn't even bear bringing the horrific images to mind so unthinkable were they . All his mind would allow him to

remember was the sun burning brightly followed by the dark cloak of death.

Claude's hand ventured out in desperation for some comfort from the touch of his beautiful wife Victoria laying close to him. Her beautiful smooth skin and sultry dark hair illuminated by moonlight that shone its gaze on her through their french windows.

Claude placed his hand gently down upon her beautiful hair, but instead of experiencing the soft touch of her flowing locks something else greeted his fingertips -something warm , sticky and-. Claude's hands seized with panic at last found the motivation to move with a purpose and clumsily switched the bed side lamp on. The light uncovered the darkness that had been hiding its terrible secret and revealed that Claude's hands had been painted red .He stared at them in disbelief as if they belonged to someone else and refused to let his eyes reveal to him what surrounded him.

It was a futile effort. Eventually his eyeball muscles could no longer resist the terrible temptation and involuntarily flitted fearfully to his left -it was at that moment that Claude wished that he had been born blind.

His beautiful wife twisted and contorted corpse lay there frozen with rigor mortis. draped in her white silk night dress that had been dyed a deep red while her poor shattered skull lay crushed like a bad egg that perched sickening at the top of her once perfect body.

Claude opened his mouth to let out a long loud scream.

"And you say you're had these same dream within a dream for the past few years? Claude's Therapist enquired.

"Since I was a child!" corrected Claude.

"Yes...eh since you were a child" verified Claude's Therapist - A Mr Letissia.

Claude bit his lip angrily as he felt a geyser of impatience welling up inside of him. As far as he was concerned this damn Therapist had an annoying habit of repeating himself as well as repeating everything Claude said it was a habit that Claude had always found annoying this was made worse by the fact that he was actually paying this person to try and help him. This numskull would be better of receiving therapy sessions rather than receiving them.

"And you say you haven't got a wife or a close girlfriend called Victoria." continued Dr Letissia adopting an authoritative tone

"No I haven't" Claude replied through gritted teeth. "I divorced my wife 2 years ago and she looked nothing like this dead woman in this dream.

"So you say?" he replied his tone lanced with doubt.

"What do yer mean so I say? You saying that I don't know the difference between my wife and this dead woman?"

"I-I-I - was only suggesting" Dr Lettisia tried to stammer out in an attempt to back track and repair the damage he had unwittily wreaked on his therapist -patient relation with Claude, who could no longer contain the lava flow of anger erupting inside of him.

" I don't care what you were suggesting this is all a waste of damn time and you're a waste of damn time!" he blared out stabbing his finger accusingly a few inches from the Doctor's face.

Without waiting for a reply Claude stormed out of the Therapist's office with all the force of a force 10 hurricane leaving the Doctor open mouthed and eyes wide open in shock reminiscent of a fish out of water something that Claude would have thought very apt.

Claude glanced at his watch and cursed he was running late for work. He continued along the tunnel from the Doctor's office and punched in his ID code into his residency cubicle door. It had been 10 years since mankind had colonised the moon and set up the first moon base. Since then it had flourished and spread its tentacles over half of the dust-bowl planet consisting of tunnels corridors and airlocks. At first it had just been NASA personnel but eventually this unique town had opened up its airlock doors to welcome entrepreneurs, billionaires, millionaires, and lastly ordinary citizens all of whom had to go through a strict selection process- A process that probably needed tightening up Claude surmised as he remembered the inept therapist.

He shuddered as he realised that night (or to be more precise during his rest period as it was always night on the moon), he would have to do battle with his familiar demons in his

unforgettable recurring disaster mare that would never leave him alone at night but which would flee from him when he woke up leaving a bitter taste in his mind.
"What's the matter Claude you look as if you've got the weight of the whole world on your shoulders!" Roused from his troubles Claude turned round sharply to see his friend and work colleague Mac , looking at him with a look of concern on his face

"Yeah I feel it!" Claude agreed flatly.

"Therapist not working out well" observed Mac.

"Not working out at all more like!" Claude exclaimed.

"I might be able to help you there " Mac's face concern was replaced with a wide smile.

"You know someone?". Claude was sure that no one could be worse his previous therapist who he had squandered so many moon credits over.

"Not exactly but I know OF somebody" Mac continued" Think he's located in sector 4 been there for the last year or so"

"What do you know about him?" Claude enquired eagerly his interest and hope rising steadily.

"Not much except that I haven't heard any complaints about him that's got to be a big plus! Even I knew that your Dr Tissue was a waste of space!"

"Pity you didn't share your groundbreaking newsflash with me" sniffed Claude.

"I did try if you remember but you didn't want to listen !" chastised Mac.

"Then you should have tried harder" joked Claude his spirits suddenly uplifted happy at the possibility of a solution to his problem at last "I might well go and see him! You said Sector 4 right?" checked Claude.

"Yeah a Dr Ditall" Mac divulged as he moved a step closer to Claude in order to talk in quieter tones. "Do yourself a favour and do that . From one friend to another you're starting to look like dog crap!"

"Yeah Thanks pal" Claude remarked sarcastically.

"That's what friends are for pal to tell the truth when no one else will!" lectured Mac as he gave Claude a quick pat on the shoulders before going cheerfully on his way.

Claude cancelled the ID number that would open his door and quickly started to make his way down to Sector 4.

Sector had acquired itself a reputation as a fashionable area with many up-market trading areas selling high-cost high-quality merchandise. It was the middle of the Lunar month so the area was quite deserted due to the fact that the vast majority of the working population was paid at the end of each month.

It didn't take Claude long to get there and after a quick scan search in the 3D trading area layout map was easily able to locate a chrome glass fronted trading area where Dr Itall's practice was situated. The gold encrusted sign said open and with no further encouragement needed by Claude he marched straight into the premises.

His presence immediately activated a metallic droid attendant which sprung into action swivelling carefully over to Claude on its small wheels.

"Can I be of help to you Sir?" its mechanical voice cranked away.

"Yeah I was hoping to see Dr Ditall I've got -" began Claude.

"An appointment Sir?" the droid interrupted, obviously ignorant of human etiquette.

"No but-" Claude protested.

Then I will make one for you for next week" the droid continued in his pompous manner.

Claude wondered on which snobbish person its personality programme had been modelled on, whoever that culprit was it was a person that he would dearly loved to have broken his or her's neck at that particular moment in time. Failing that he might seriously think of breaking the Droid's voice communicator. Neither was necessary for at that moment a pair of tinted glass doors slid silently open and a middle aged, balding man dressed in

a slightly creased blue suit bounded in.

"Sorry about the droid sir. I've been trying to get a modification update programme for his human skills databank for months" he apologised immediately "Seems that all the major suppliers stopped producing parts for this old model type years ago!"

Without waiting for Claude to acknowledge his apology, the man swung round in a scolding manner to deal with the droid. "Power down!" he ordered the little metallic monster which instantly obeyed its master 's command.

The bald man's hand shot out like an arrow to shake Claude's hand. "Dr Nigel Ditall at your service! And you're?"

"Claude, Claude Tenchie Doctor. I hoped you might be able to help me with a recurring nightmare that I keep having"

"I hope so too Mr Tenchie! You must be aware that non of my patients have ever had anything bad to say about me and my treatment" He boasted proudly.

"Yes I had heard that rumour .Doctor!" replied Claude as he grasped the Doctor's hand. Something about the Doctor's name made him feel uneasy for some unknown reason. But Claude dismissed such a foolish thought when he felt the Doctor's firm handshake- always the sign of an honest person.

"Not a rumour Mr Tenchie an indisputable true fact as you will find out!" defended the Doctor as he continue to shake Claude's

hand vigorously.

Claude decided to get straight down to business.. "How much is the initial consultation Doctor?" he ventured boldly.

"2000 moon credits" the Doctor replied cheerfully his smile never flinching once.

The same could not be said for Claude who froze, shocked at the high price.

"Don't worry if you're not permanently cured there's a money-back guarantee!" The Doctor chipped in . Somewhat reassured and pleasantly surprised by the Doctor's promise Claude took out his electronic payment card , 2000 moon credits was a high price but it was a price worth paying if it cured his problem once and for all.

" I'm afraid that we have a policy of cash only Mr Tenchie" warned the Doctor and in anticipation of Claude's next question continued "makes the paperwork and accounts so much easier as I'm sure you can imagine!"

"Yes I can imagine" Claude empathised some what nonplussed by this second bombshell. He had 3000 moon credits which he had been planning to deposit in his savings account but what better investment was there than his own health. After all he had been offered a guarantee! Without hesitation he counted the money out under Mr Ditall's casual gaze and handed the thick bundle over to him, who in turn gave him a signed money-back

guarantee form.

With the essential formalities dealt with they both trooped into the expensive luxuriously furnished consulting room where Claude made himself comfortable on a large red leather-bound armchair where he talked at length and in great detail about his problem while Dr Ditall listened patiently nodding his head in acknowledgement and understanding while occasionally making notes. Finally after about an hour Claude finished talking and sat back feeling better already as if the weight the size of the moon was no longer on each of his shoulders.

"So do you think that you can help me Doc?" Claude asked hopefully.

"I'm sure we can Claude!" Dr Ditall beamed supremely confident. "You've been talking at great length , your throat must be dry would you like some water before we commence with the treatment?"

"That will be just great thanks!" smiled Claude relieved by the Doctor's confident response. Claude gratefully took the water, he manage to take only 2 gulps before passing out cold.

Claude awoke to find himself strapped in a chair with a gag over his mouth, he tried to move. Although the room had no windows and very little light he could make out the dim outline of some sort of a door.

"Sorry about the discomfort Mr Tenchie it won't last for long I

assure you." came the misleadingly assuring voice of the Doctor from what sounded like an intercom transmitter located somewhere in the ceiling.

"I meant what I said about curing your problem permanently Claude and you're going to find out why I don't get any complaints!" concluded the Doctor all the previous warmth gone only to have been replaced by a cold edged hardness.

A deadly realisation of what was going to happen came to Claude in one terrible and final moment. The finality of the Doctor's promise and his name -Nigel Ditall- N DITALL ? END IT ALL!! The irony of the name might have caused Claude to laugh out loud if the airlock door to the lunar surface hadn't opened at that very second. Instead all he could do was convulse uncontrollably as his eyeballs exploded in their sockets and his skull expanded to that of a balloon that would pop at any moment.

A bizarre regret flashed through his brain before it started to spill out through his ear drums- who the hell was the woman in his dream? A question to which there would never be an answer.

As the last of his breath rushed out of his body Claude felt the scorching heat of the sun and opened his mouth to let out a long loud scream that would never come.

INTO AND OUT OF OBLIVION

It was 5am when I died.

If I am sure of anything then I am at least sure of that . I remembered seeing it clearly on the bland white hospital clock on the hospital wall opposite me, it was the last thing on this earth that I saw. Some people say see a tunnel of light , some say they feel a great peace and air of tranquillity come over them. I saw nothing. I felt nothing . The only intrusion into my limbo was the intense frantic shouts and orders being passed between the doctor and nurses in the emergency room. as they tried to drag me back into the world of the living.

I felt my skin being punctured with needles shooting adrenaline into my corroding heart in a futile effort to inject some high octane gasoline into my body's engine jump- but right now my body's engine wasn't even turning over never mind revving up and driving my bodily functions into action.

My body arched , heaved and contorted with feigned activity as they sent numerous volts cruising my body in an attempt to jump-start my heart but as soon as the current stopped so my body also ceased its strange involuntary spasms, but no spark was fierce enough to stoke the fire to my engine . Not long afterwards a cold sharp sensation entered my chest and I guessed that they must be slicing open my chest so that they might be able to give me heart massage and give me back my life.

Fingers gripped by insides and tried to start my biological human

pump but no amount of force would cause the limp muscle to beat and the fingers soon withdrew heralding the withdrawal of my own presence from this world.

I fell asleep in darkness and awoke in darkness. My cry went out for not being able to hold my family one more time , my daughters my wife- not being able to say one more last time goodbye and that I loved them these were things that I would gladly have sold my soul for us to be a family again except that I was dead and there were no buyers for a dead soul that had departed the world, whoever had my soul now possessed it and did not need to bargain for it. It was a soul that had so many regrets and now had so much time to regret those regrets in what would be an infinite cycle.

"Want to trade?" the darkness spoke to me the voice came all around me at once and crowded against me from all sides its desperation pressing hard against me.

" I have nothing to trade with you ." I replied denying my self the hope that there was
hope.

But you do son of man you do!" it oozed back all the time its tone growing in a crescendo of excitement and longing. " You have yourself to trade with and that is all you need!"

What do you want?" I wondered half to myself expecting no reply but still getting one

"What I want is unimportant to you! What you want is important" answered the voice skilfully avoiding the question. "You want to go back to your world of the living .You want a moment with your family ? I can give you all that and so much more!" said the voice enticingly.

"I will give you a second chance a second life!"

"How?" I pleaded desperately.

"Just say yes that is how!" it ordered

"YES!" my soul cried out with all its energy, regret and longing.

"So be it " cried the voice back. "You will have your family once more and take my place.

There was a blinding light , the darkness lifted like a veil and light cascaded over me from all sides. I looked around and found myself standing outside a familiar house in a familiar street in a familiar town . My town, MY street! MY house! In disbelief I made my way to the front door it was open but that was nothing unusual during these hot summer days besides we lived in a crime free neighbourhood where everyone trusted one another .

Creeping into the living room I saw my family huddled together and crying for a father they would never see again. It was my youngest Linda who first sensed me near her and looked up and stared at me through her tears.

"DADDY!" she shrieked again and again , a moment later my eldest daughter Sara joined in the chorus started by her baby sister. Both of my girls rushed to me arms flung open wide and wrapped their small arms around my waist sobbing with tears of joy while I embraced them both at once never wanting to let go.

Lastly Maria who had at first been overcome with shock and who was now overcome with disbelieving joy ran towards me her red shot eyes bearing testimony to her grief.
They were eyes that had cried so much that there were no more tears in them left to shed.

"Oh Rob! You're alive ! You're alive!" she kept repeating over and over again as we all embraced.

We stayed there motionless, not saying anything , just holding one another for us time had stood still and it seemed that it would never move again.

Of course I eventually had to let them go. I watched unsurprised as their lifeless bodies tumbled helplessly to the thick carpet below. Their spirits immediately vacated their now useless corpses and rose up to take my hand as I gently led them out of the house and into the world outside, our world! We were a family once again this time forever. I had always realised what the darkness had been and what I had become I had just been too afraid to face the truth. I had no choice but to admit it now. My touch brought death, my embrace brought death. I had become death.

WRITER'S BLOCK

I'm on a roll now! I must write! Ideas , phrases , vivid sentences flash down in surges into my hand through my pen and onto this page. It is like a disease that I don't want to be cured from or an obsession that I won't ever and can never break!

I throw my mind back in time to memories when I had been going through a creative drought with my writing, it was a problem that all my writer friends had succumbed to in the past. Even my University lecturer, a man of several high -brow and intellectual best-sellers had experienced this desert of the mind where no new ideas or stories would grow.

Not having been through it myself. I had belittled their plight and found it laughable
even unbelievable that these fine minds of letters could fail to accomplish what they had been born to do. During more uncharitable moments I imagined that perhaps it was all a fabricated excuse to take time off from what must have been an arduous and boring job for them at times. It would never occur to me that these gifted authors could actually run out of subjects or words to put down on paper. Then one day the seemingly impossible happened and my ideas dried up.

Just before that time I had already had some short stories published in a local magazine and I was just starting to feel good about myself and my prospects as a 'published' author. Suddenly it was then that I saw the advert in a National newspaper for a short story competition. My eyes lit up with pound and dollars

signs in them as I saw a way of making myself some real money at last but equally important was a way of getting some REAL money at last but equally important was a way of getting some REAL national exposure that would give one of the big-time , big-city agents the necessary confidence and encouragement to put me on their books.

It would then just be a matter of time before their various far reaching connections paid off with him getting me a book deal worth at least a cool million, fame and fortune would then follow me like a faithful dog wherever I went. That had at least been my plan or rather my fantasy , reality however had followed its own agenda.

The sun was burning brightly in the sky sending rays of hope through my window when I sat down at my writing desk pen in hand a wad of blank paper scattered on the mahogany surface. I felt ready to compose my masterpiece that would be used as a reference model by writers' s workshops for generations to come.

I raised my blue pen and waited for the ideas to flow like water - nothing happened.
I closed my eyes and tried to think of something anything- nothing happened.
I tried pacing about concentrating on thinking up that certain something that would tell the competition judges that this was a story worthy of the highest accolade, but thinking harder just seemed to make that elusive idea even more distant while the continual pacing about made my feet sore.

Eventually I flopped down in my chair totally mentally exhausted and realised that I was now a victim of writer's block!

Hours passed , days and months rushed by and along with it the competition deadline
and a lost opportunity that I might possibly never find again perhaps for a while but most probably for a lifetime.

Once where ideas would erupt there was nothing but emptiness. I rang round my circle of friends to get some pointers that would help get me out of this rut, suggestions ranged from just riding out the storm until it inevitably passed to reading books and watching and films, all of these had interesting ideas but none of them inspired any ideas of my own. They were certainly nothing that I could base a whole book or story on without running the risk of facing a lawsuit for plagiarism!

At long last I resigned myself to the fact that I was to be a creative cripple for the foreseeable future whose career as a writer had ended before it had begun.

One mundane morning I idly picked up a newspaper and opened it- then the idea came to me!

The idea came to me as suddenly as my creative ideas had left me. The cure to my problem lay before me on each page that I turned! There before me lay newspaper items and behind each item lay a story , a human story , a story for me to write!

But I could take my story further much further. What if a writer

who had nothing to write about set into action some event , some news item then wrote about it as the events unfolded right through to the conclusion "A simply brilliant concept" I thought to myself proudly!

The initial idea though needed to be thought through much more and planned much more thoroughly before I could even think of taking it seriously. At the moment it seemed more farcical than fantastic but no matter what reason I threw up to dismiss it, it had a tight hold on me and my enthusiasm would not let go of it . Slowly but surely I started to formulate a simple plan that would evolve my idea from a series of thoughts in my head into a fail-safe plan of action.

A day later I had my plan . A week later I was ready to put my plan into action. A month later I did.

I had chosen the house carefully. I had chosen the time carefully, according to my observations everyone was out. I had long decided I might be desperate but I wasn't murderous.

Crouching under the cover of darkness I crept up to the front door lit a strip of cloth soaked in gasoline and quickly shoved the burning flame through the letter box . As I turned I heard the whoosh as the fire spread down the hall. There was no time for me to admire my handiwork as I quickly fled the scene. Back home I couldn't get to sleep because of my excitement, excitement over what the newspaper would have to say about it or more important what I would have to write about it.

The following morning my hands shook with anticipation as I heard my morning newspaper being delivered. Fumbling clumsily I opened it and dropped it in shock.
staring at it in disbelief.

Its front page headlines stared back at me "FAMILY OF 5 KILLED IN ARSON ATTACK" I collapsed in a state of shock and nausea unable to comprehend what I had done, knowing now that I had made an error that had proved fatal for a family.

In a sick way I knew then and there that I had to write their story and mine so that their deaths wouldn't have been for nothing. Writing was my disease and nothing would cure it.. Picking up a pen and paper I started to write and did not stop all through the inquest, the investigation , all of it....

John paused, his masterpiece was almost finished there was just one more sentence to add.- "At 10pm they executed me."

The heavy footsteps that had at first seen so distant suddenly became loud and near as the chaplain and the guards opened his condemned cell.

"Its time John". half-whispered the Chaplain.
"Coming Padre!" John sprung up cheerfully. It was a cheerfulness that alarmed and mystified all of his entourage that was to escort him to the electric chair for the self-confessed cold-blooded murder of 5 innocent people.

Just before he left the cell John looked back satisfied at the finished manuscript of what was to be a best seller, his death ,madness and wrong conviction for murder would see to that. He then turned to make the short trip to the execution chamber as he walked happily to his death he couldn't control himself any longer….. and burst out into a cheerful whistle!

THE PIT (PART 1)

Mike had always known that there had been something extraordinary about himself , although knowing this he hadn't always believed it , perhaps it was his almost instinctive habit to be self-effacing and think less of himself than others around him did. It was a habit that had cost him as a child much sleep and wasted much energy in worrying about his curiosity in the shadows that danced freely on his bedroom ceiling , wondering if they might be real people inhabiting some dark unseen world that only came to light in the dark and not just shadows haphazardly cast from the flickering flames of the open-hearth fire a few metres away from the foot of his bed.

It was only he after all who had on that camping trip to France many hot summers ago been the only one who had possessed the metal to lead his frightened class-mates to a seemingly deserted ruin. If Mike was to have been honest it was not curiosity or a quest for the unknown which had been the driving motivation for his expedition into that dark building other stronger human emotions had been at work , namely that of sexual attraction to a beautiful intelligent dark -haired girl who he had been hopelessly in love with for ages and had been desperate to impress-Nadia was her name and elegance and mystery was her nature. Her family were from the middle-east and her eyes held the reward of eastern promise while her beautifully sculpted facial features had long cast their beguiling trance over the besotted Mike as they had over every other red-blooded male in the class. She was the centre of all the boy's raging hormones. Nadia knew it and Nadia loved it.!

She liked nothing better than to hold court outside the class room with each of hopeful suitors trying to enthral her with a greater and greater compliments about her sumptuous beauty and attempt to impress her with the promise of braver and more daring deeds that they would carry out that they might earn a kiss from her inviting lips. During all these labours all that they would be rewarded with was her mischievous laughter as she threw a head back vibrantly and carefree, but just to see her do that was enough to make many of them ready to die with desire.

So it transpired on that fateful day near Dieppe that Mike saw his chance to get close to Nadia , and seized that chance with both his hands! The ruin had seemed dark than night and had cast a shadow of foreboding over the school children as they had ventured near it. Their raucous shouts and jabbering had been lowered to that of a hushed whisper in reverence to the fear that the structure had instilled in them.

Even Mr Wood the head master seemed slightly uneasy and hesitant as he led his young wards to the decaying pile of stones. He looked down at the map and at the information leaflet about the remains of what was once a proud church laid to waste by a German WW2 bomb. It seemed strange that no one had rebuilt it he reflected. A beautiful church would fit in so nicely to the surrounding gently rolling French countryside like a diamond surrounded by a sea of emeralds.

"Gather round children!" he called out to the scattered flock that seemed unsure what how to react to the sight before them and

what to make of this whole sight seeing trip.
"The church" began Mr Wood confidently to the distracted children "THE CHURCH" Mr Wood started again irritated by the lack of attentiveness to his voice. This time his voice held the tone his pupils knew and feared at school, it was the tone he used when someone was on the verge of detention or a verbal barrage of punishment. His words brought the class to attention as 30 dozen pairs of young eyes stared transfixed on their temporary surrogate parent.

Mr Wood's words unfortunately did not hold sway over all the class though, the words wafted over Mike like passing mist who was totally distracted by the love of his dreams - Nadia who was on the verge of fulfilling the fantasy of his young life that of him being near her, of touching her a beautiful hair as it waved closer and closer to him in the light breeze. She was crouching down and watching something with all the fascination of a scientist studying some newly identified organism.

Mike mustered his strength, took a deep breath and ventured closer his light trainers crushing the flourishing green grass underneath. His feet edged closer and closer the prize awaiting him - a long close gaze at Nadia's lithe petite figure. He was leaning over her now and felt the swirling winds of ecstasy crashing about in his head, almost sending him into a dizzy spell but he steadied himself with the desire that he felt for Nadia that moment . A feeling so joyful that it felt too good to keep to himself , and almost made him burst with the shouts of joy mingled with boasting that he wanted to exclaim to his soon to be envious male colleagues. But he contained himself and managed

to force his tongue to make verbal contact with her in a most forced casual
manner imaginable.

"What yer looking at Nadia?" Mike was amazed that his voice betrayed none of the lust that was spreading throughout his body.

Nadia supple body uncoiled like a snake and sprang up she turned round with a look mixed with guilt and surprise which quickly vanished when she saw her Mike.

"Don't worry Old Woody's too busy giving his guided tour speech to the rest of the class to notice us!" reassured Mike whose hand was dying to reach out and entwine it round her but which was held back by the social manners that the world had taught him.

Usually Mike would have never dared showed such disrespect as to refer to Mr Wood by his nick-name widely used in the playground, and known to every pupil with ears. But this was a unique event and fuelled by the Dutch courage brought on by the love that flowed from his heart he had found in himself a sense of bravado he never knew he had . It was this chance-taking spirit that caused him to talk about his headmaster in such a reckless fashion in the vain hope that it might somehow impress and surprise the beauty as it was, it was she who surprised him.

"This way I need you to help me Mike" she pleaded as she grabbed Mike by the hand and began pulling him along to the spot that held her attention so completely. Mike was too dazed to realise what she was pointing at excitedly and too drunk with

happiness to care!

He could hardly believe that she had referred to him by his name, all this time when he thought that he had been invisible to her , all this time when he thought himself not even worthy of a glance from her ethereal eyes, she had noticed him she had seen him! He felt that he could have leapt up to the moon and back with joy , if the second miracle hadn't occurred, she was holding his hand! and not just a limp hold but a firm vice-like grip that would take all of heaven and earth to break! It was held in the sort of hold that he would expect 2 young lovers to hold onto each other!

At that moment in time if she had led him off a sheer cliff face he would have followed his eyes blinded to everything around him except her and her beautiful countenance as sit was she led him to something outwardly dramatically less dangerous looking but still sinister in appearance.

"LOOK! LOOK!" she commanded as she pointed feverishly at the outline that what looked like a door buried beneath a thick carpet of grass and dirt.

"Wow!" replied an astounded Mike "Let's tell Mr Wood!" he continued as he lapsed back into the goody 2 shoes model pupil character that the pupils hated him for and for which the teachers loved him for.

"No!" she demanded squeezing his hand even tighter as if he might try to escape her clutches. "He'll only spoil the fun by forbidding us to go near it never mind in it!

"In it Nadia? Its too dangerous!" protested Mike, for a second he forgot his raging hormones and started to feel the young teenager that he was. He looked at Nadia's face for sympathy but found none, who met his frightened gaze with a hard as rock stare carved from granite.

"You're not scared are you?" she smirked gleefully and as casually as she had grabbed Mike's arm she now just as casually let it go. With that sudden break in their intimacy he felt as if someone had cut off the oxygen and blood to his head he had to do something anything to continue to live the dream.

" No of course not!" Mike shot back defiantly "I thought it might be too dangerous for you not me!"

"Well it isn't! Now help me dig! " she snapped back " -if you've got the guts!" she added mockingly.

It was a sort of challenge she knew that boys like Mike would never shirk from. Their pride and self-esteem would never allow them to back away from picking up such a gauntlet. The sort of gauntlet that this besotted fool was going to reach out and grab. Nadia had long realised that her beauty while making her the envy of the girls could be used as a weapon to enslave infatuated young boys like the one in front of her now. It was a skill that she had now become adept in , it was a tool that she wielded effortlessly and without remorse for the hapless foolish victim left to take all the blame for whatever misdeed that she had perpetrated . Invariably he would shoulder the punishment gladly as he would see himself as some knight in shining armour protecting his

damsel in distress from pain and suffering - all in the name of love!!"

Mike hadn't needed to be goaded any further and with great gusto threw himself to the ground to tear furiously at the clumps of grass obscuring the door to .. to God only knew! Nadia joined him and they both set about in their work in demented manner as if their very lives depended on how quickly they could clear away the area over the decrepit door.

"Faster! Mike faster!" pleaded Nadia as her small hands wrapped round a huge clump of grass and wrenched it out in one go.

"I am going faster! Look at me!" boasted Mike as his hands almost became a blur as he turned into a grass- puller machine removing huge clumps with both hands. One after another, one after another till the door had been plucked clean of the grass that it had grown . All that was left hiding it from their sight was a layer of dry-baked earth that had clogged up the hinges and lock, but the two pairs of grubby green-stained hands didn't take long to clear it and reveal a fungus encrusted oak trapdoor, level with undulating ground around it. Across it an iron bolt that had rusted scarlet straddled the door pinning it down to the ground.

"Will you look at that -it must be at a hundred years old maybe even more!" Mike almost yelled in excitement.

"Never mind looking at it let's get it open!" implored Nadia impatiently.

Mike glanced back nervously his heart pounding madly at his ribcage to see if his excitement had aroused the curiosity of the others but instead saw them being led around the other side of the ruin by Mr Woods. His little adventure with Nadia had so far gone undiscovered and his heart 's heavy pounding returning to a slower and rhythmic steady beating. Letting out a sigh of relief Mike returned to his labours under the supervision of Nadia who now stood over him watching intently her face filled with expectation and mingled with fear of what lay behind the door. Mike loved that expression and tugged at the outlandishly huge bolt even harder.

"Come on !" she growled almost savagely. " You can do it !You have to do it!" she barked at him.

Mike's fingers strained under the pressure that he exerted on the bolt but it was stubborn and had made up its mind to stay exactly where it had been for the last hundred or so years. The outline of his veins forced their way up through to his skin as he heaved and pulled, then heaved and pulled again. Finally .with sweat coming of his brow in a torrent he collapsed back onto the surrounding grassy bed

"Its no good Nadia its stuck solid!" an exasperated Mike managed to force out between breaths.

"The only thing no good here is you !" accused Nadia as she jabbed her finger at him.

Mike was still trying to get his breath back and starting to feel a

tide of anger and defiance quelling up inside of him , after all he had toiled and sweated for his love and she just didn't appreciate or seem grateful for all the trouble that he was putting himself through!

"What's so important about this darn door anyway! Why is it so important?" he questioned an angry tone building with each word.

"Why is it so important?" she replied in an angry whisper seemingly astounded that she could be asked such a question. "Why is it so important" she repeated as if giving Mike one last chance to retract his foolish words before she would obliterate him with a series of verbal body blows.

Moving ever closer to Mike she said in a quiet voice brimming with rage and frustration which threatened to boil over in the form of a temper tantrum at any second. "Its important Mike because its important to me! Got it?"

Mike got it and reluctantly got back to the bolt knowing full well that he was in the power of this irresistible femme fatale. Mike took a deep breath counted silently to three and pulled at the bolt with all his might, nothing happened, he tried again it didn't budge. He tried again this time instead he kept the pressure on and locked his fingers into a brutal tug of war with the eroded bolt.

Mike leaned back to use the added force of his body weight in his battle to unbolt the door , he could feel his tendons straining till they felt as if they might be torn from their sockets. He felt the slow trickle of blood of run down his fingers as the sharp rusty

fragments from the bolt bit deep into his skin, the fear of getting tetanus clouded his concentration for a moment, but only for a moment as he concentrated on winning this battle that he had sworn to himself to win.

Suddenly something happened. The bolt moved a fraction. It couldn't have budged more than a couple of millimetres but moved it had! It was all the encouragement that Mike needed! The scales of this battle were at last being tipped in his favour!

"You're doing it! You're doing it" exclaimed Nadia jumping up and down m in excitement at the anticipated victory that now seemed within Mike's grasp.

The bolt continued to yield to Mike's unrelenting pressure and ungraciously continued to slide along , its corroded uneven outer shell acting like a hundred tiny feet attempting to dig into any minuscule nook and cranny to resist the power of Mike's muscles .

At long last with a long drawn out creak that sounded more like a cry of submission the bolt slid all the way back utterly defeated by Mike's resolve.

"You done it!" squealed Nadia with delight. Then suddenly realising where she was and the close proximity of Mr Wood and his eager band of young tourists glanced around warily to check that no one had heard her joyous celebration.

Mike was too exhausted to care who heard and let him elf slip back onto his bed of grass as he struggled to get his strength back.

Staring closely at his hand he surveyed the damage done to it in the form of cuts and bruises, they thankfully looked superficial but he would need to let the school nurse Mrs Hawkins wash , bandage them and give him some sort of anti-infection injection just to be on the safe side. Mike silently thanked the diligence and over-protectiveness of his parents and the parents of the other pupils, it was only due to their united demand that Nurse Hawkins was here in the first place. She had been brought along in tow to ease the worry of the parents who wanted the best immediate care to be always at hand for their 'little' loved ones.

The class had left Nurse Hawkins in the coach chatting happily away to the French driver who nodded amiably while most probably not understanding a single word that she was saying to him due to his seemingly sparse knowledge of English which seemed to be limited to " No!" "Yes !" and "Maybe!" But the beauty of having a conversation with Nurse Hawkins was that it never needed to be two way only one way coming from her direction! Her incessant chatter was reminiscent of a clockwork toy whose mechanism had gone crazy and tripled its speed while at the same time some how no longer needing a key to wind it up!

Perhaps on reflection it might be best not to confront her with his injuries they would only bring up questions and suspicions if the answers didn't seem quite right , perhaps he could sneak back onto the bus and while she was in her deep one-way conversation with the hapless driver quickly open the first-aid box kept at the back of the coach and give himself some first aid treatment. This plan seemed more acceptable than the first but seemed a high probability of failure and then he would definitely be in trouble

then on the other hand he thought - Mike never got to finish the thought.

"Oh Mike you're wonderful you did it!" praised Nadia as she leapt onto the worn-out. boy interrupting his decision over what plan to use to deal with the treatment of his injured hands.

Still too tired to move Mike just lay there his body on the ground but his mind in a seventh heaven as Nadia rained down sweet kisses over his face in quick succession each one sweeter than the last and sending surges of desire throughout his body.

"It was nothing Nadia. You know that I'll do anything for you!" oozed Mike as he tried to put a brave face on and grimace through the throbbing pain coming from hands.

"Oh you poor thing!" gasped Nadia as she caught sight of his blood-stained fingers, taking out a tissue she quickly wiped the dried blood away leaving the open cuts but fortunately the blood had clotted sealing the cut with a layer of dried blood and dying blood cells.

Mike let her fuss over him and was starting to feel like a king with Nadia as his Queen. King Mike and Queen Nadia did have a certain regal ring to it! He would have loved it to have gone on for ever the 2 of them together in their own world but he was brought back with a jolt into the real world . When out of Nadia's beautiful lips that hovered erotically close to his she whispered- " Now lets open it up baby and see what's inside!"

Fuelled by her kisses and nursing Mike arose without hesitation a new purpose in his mind and step.

"Yeah let's!" he replied enthusiastically his determined gaze not only matching but surpassing that of Nadia's.

The oak trapdoor stood staring stoically before them defiant like a lion with no teeth which can only roar with a mouth full of gums . Mike knelt down and took a firm grip on the round iron rings that would open up the entrance to the world below.

"Where do you think this leads to?" she asked excitedly.

Mike frowned as his vice-like clench on the handle opened one of the cuts on his fingers." It could be an escape tunnel which the priests used during persecutions it might even lead to a wine cellar!" he joked light-heartedly. "Whatever it is" he concluded seriously "We're going to find out in a moment!"

Nadia nodded in agreement and waited with bated breath as Mike heaved at the heavy door exerting his body to the limit. After what seemed an eternity Mike's strength prevailed and the door lifted an inch only to fall back down forcefully again when Mike's muscles failed to deliver the essential surge of power necessary to pull back the door completely.

"Come on baby try again! You almost did it!" pleaded Nadia.

Mike tensed his muscles like a panther ready to spring and got ready for one last effort (hopefully!) positioning himself

strategically by the door to give him maximum leverage in the feat that he knew he couldn't fail if his love for Nadia- or rather her love for him was to survive!

Mike cleared his mind and concentrated on lifting that door! That's all he knew! That's all he wanted! He tried to ignore the near-frenzied chartings of Nadia who was dancing about wildly like a cheerleader willing her basketball team on to victory(in this case a one man team!). But there was no shutting out her ravings which Mike was finding increasingly distracting and more and more disturbing.

In his mind he chose the word ravings carefully to describe her chants which seemed to be whipping herself up into a frenzy. The words seemed unintelligible and even when he heard the words that she was saying he didn't understand what the word actually meant, one thing that he was sure of was that it was no word of modern day English! Perhaps they were Arabic words originating from her homeland.

At first her words had been words of praise and gentle encouragement but soon transformed into frantic words of panic and strange words as he gripped the handle again but just before he was going to give the door one almighty pull. She stopped her senseless rantings and ravings and whispered seductively into his ear. "You can do it! I know you can do it baby!"

"I know I can and I will Nadia just you watch me!" responded Mike smiling and happy to see the Nadia he knew and loved resurfacing replacing the alien one that he had just experienced.

Summoning all the energy from the four corners of his mind and body he pulled, he pulled like he had never pulled before his life, he pulled like his life depended on it.

The trapdoor rose a crack still reluctant to reveal its secrets that crack turned into an inch that inch stretched itself into 3 inches and so on till to Mike's amazement he had the door almost vertical but due to his position he couldn't even glimpse his reward for his heavy toil which was to amount to nothing more than to look down at what passage was being hidden under this heavy piece of oak.

Then disaster struck, without warning the weight of the trapdoor started to pull Mike causing him to loose vital inches - at least he thought that it must be the weight of the oak door , he would not have been surprised if there had been a dozen invisible hands clinging onto that door pulling in the opposite direction. He turned his head to Nadia his eyes pleading silently for her help who was now standing passively on the sidelines totally absorbed in total anticipation over what was going to be revealed.

"Would you like me to help !" she offered half-heartedly , but Mike's teenage sense of macho pride refused to allow him to accept the much needed offer. He made up his mind that if he was going to do it then he was going to do it on his own , he wanted no help from her.

"It Ok baby stay where you are I can handle it!" he spluttered out through gritted teeth, Nadia quickly seemed to accept his pledge and was content not to get her dress or hands any dirtier.

Mike dug his heels hard into the soft earth and leaning back again tried to anchor his position. Using every ounce of his weight he moved one foot back and then another in a methodical method each time digging in each heel down as far as it would go. He felt that each step backwards guaranteed him a victory and a place in Nadia's heart with these twin incentives in his mind he strode on eagerly to his prizes.

At long last after a catalogue of injuries , frustrations and set-backs . Mike effort teetered on success with the door exactly vertical , he had optimistically at the start hoped to lower the door slowly but he now threw such a foolhardy plan out of his brain and gave the door one last yank that drained the last energy reserves out of him and left him feeling like an empty husk.

Instantly he let go of the door and rolled out of its path as gravity brought it crashing to the ground. Mike had expected a deafening crash but he was gratefully disappointed. The thick luscious grass acted as a good cushion with the ancient trap door crushing the green blades flat. The only sound that could be heard was a sound of a whoosh , like that of air being let out of an inflated balloon followed by a shot soft thump as the door came to rest finally on the soil.

Mike and Nadia looked at each other each could see the fear mixed with curiosity on the other's face as they instinctively took each other 's hands as if somehow this bond would give the other confidence and strength in their quest for the unknown things that they thought they might now discover.

For the briefest of seconds Nadia flashed a wide smile at Mike which conveyed so many emotions and messages at once thanks , pride in Mike's achievement and most importantly love. Moving slowly and carefully they neared the hole in the ground which they had uncovered and with even more undue care they gingerly leaned over it to see what mystery it had to offer. But the only mystery that it offered was just another mystery for all that the two would be explorers could see was just pitch black darkness, even the rays of a summer day did not seem able to penetrate this wall of shadows.

"Its too damn dark down there!" Mike commented stating the obvious.
"What do we do now?" ventured Nadia her quaking voice betraying the fact that she was scared silly.
"It no use going on let's get back to the others before they leave us behind!" he suggested as his soiled white shirt half open flapped slightly in an unsettling breeze that had suddenly materialised.

Nadia opened her mouth as if to agree then clamped it down tight and shook her head vigorously while muttering "We've been to too much trouble already baby for us to stop now. We've got to try something!"

Mike grumbled silently to himself 'WE'VE BEEN to so much trouble I'm the one whose been doing all the work I'm the one whose been to all the trouble!' He could feel their first lover's tiff on the horizon and opened his mouth in protest to give her ten good logical reasons why they should abort their expedition and head back to 'base camp!'

At least that is what he would have done if his eyes had not gazed into her large dark mysterious eyes that seemed to be pleading with him, no more than pleading, begging him to find away for them to continue it was almost as if she was on her knees before him right now. But he was at her mercy , powerless to stop her beautiful eyes from melting his hardened heart into a river that carried all his protests away.

Mike was hit by a solution so apparent he almost swore at himself, reaching into his pocket his hand closed round a possible remedy to their dilemma- his key-ring ! A key-ring that had attached to it a silver penlight torch. Mike displayed it triumphantly to Nadia.

"Maybe this might help!" he said beaming proudly and feeling pleased with himself for being so well prepared for this situation.

"You're wonderful I knew that you would think of something!" Nadia gushed while hugging him tightly.

"Well let's hope that it works then!" Mike replied excitedly as he felt Nadia's perfect body pressed firmly against his own.

Mike decided not to impart to Nadia the fact that in the past the torch's reliability had proved erratic due to battery leakage, in case it dampened her feeling of admiration for him but why should he tell her anyway? After all he had cleaned out the battery compartment and put in some high power alkaline batteries! He quickly separated the smart -looking silver coloured torch from the keys under the impatient gaze of Nadia and pressed the small 'ON' button - it came on first time! Mike silently offered up a

prayer of thanks.

With Nadia clinging closely to him they peered over into the blackness, Mike looked doubtfully at the tiny torch and wondered if something so small could really penetrate something so massive and thick as the darkness that lay below them.

"Here goes nothing!" he remarked despondently in an attempt to prepare Nadia for the inevitable disappointment as he pointed the torch into the hole. But to his disbelief the small powerful beam cut through the wall of darkness as if it was a high powered laser beam rather than a humble mini-torch with an ordinary 12volt tiny bulb, its pale white glow instantly illuminating the bottom of the hole which couldn't have been more than 6 feet deep.

A tide of disappointment washed over Mike drowning his eager expectation. He had gone to all this trouble for this? -to look at a simple hole in the ground, he felt angry and stupid.

"Nothing to see here Nadia!" sighed Mike " Nadia?" he repeated again when he got no reply from his sweetheart. He glanced over to her expecting to see the same disappointment written all over her pretty face as must have been written on his. He was in for a surprise!

Instead of the expected look of disappointment he saw a strange expression of fascination and wonder on her pretty face , her perfectly formed sensuous mouth hang open in a perfect O shape. Her eyes stared transfixed into the gloom but something seemed not quite right with that stare , Mike could see something

dangerous and sinister in it . It was the stare of someone obsessed, though some how the word obsessed didn't seem quite the right word to use in relation to that stare on Nadia's face but that stare still slightly unnerved Mike but what really rattled him was not so much the fact that she seemed obsessed but the object of her obsession- a dirty shallow hole. What could she be seeing down there that he had missed?

Waving the torch slowly with its pathetically tiny spotlight he scanned the darker recesses of the perimeters of this mysterious place. The only thing that this search revealed was just dark peaty soil nothing out of the ordinary nothing unusual or even frightening.

"Come on Nadia! Let's get back!" Mike reiterated to Nadia who didn't seem to be listening, not just to him but to the whole world around her. She seemed almost frozen in time and space the only thing moving on her was her curly jet black hair draped seductively across her face that waved gently in the breeze in unison with her short black skirt and white blouse which also fluttered in the wind.

He waited their for what could not have been no more than a brief moment but it seemed like an eternity and a day before he heard the reply that he did not want to hear.

"No!" she uttered quietly but firmly.

"NO?" replied Mike incredulous at what he had heard . He felt an argument in the offing but clenched his fists in an effort to

maintain his fast disappearing self-control. He suddenly remembered a mental exercise which he had once been told in controlling one's temper - closing his eyes he began counting slowly to three. 1 - He could feel the anger strongly now ramming away at his patience 2-He pictured the anger shrinking away to nothing under the weight of his patience. 3- He felt the anger dissolving into thin air and felt ready to reply to Nadia in a calm manner.

"Why Nadia-" Mike demanded as he turned his head to put his point to ..nothing.
Nadia was gone, vanished from his side, shocked into silence he swivelled round wondering hopelessly where she might be but in his hearts of hearts he knew where she was. He forced his head to turn back towards that dark hole which had taken his Nadia away from him. He had to get her back -NOW!

"NADIA!" he called out desperately as his eyes strained to penetrate the mysterious darkness. He crouched down and craned his head over the edge of the hole and yelled out not caring who heard him just as long as of the people was his darling Nadia.

He strained his ears in the hope of picking up some small word, a sound of breathing, feet shuffling , clothing rustling, nothing came back in reply. Mike started to despair and felt his world was collapsing into a black-hole then as if in answer to his desperation a small voice answered back with a single plead. " Mike! Help me!"

"Nadia??" he cried back uncertain of whose voice it really

belonged to, logically it obviously had to be Nadia but that voice had sounded so muffled as if the darkness had stifled the words as soon as they had left her sweet lips.

What Mike found most terrifyingly disturbing was the fact that he had estimated the depth of the hole as not much taller than himself but so far his torch had discovered nothing and no one.

"Where are yer? I can't see yer baby!" bellowed back Mike as he put his hand down into the blackness that closed around his arm and grasped into nothingness. Something - he wasn't sure what! Brushed against his hand lightly causing him to recoil in shock not knowing what it could be.

Suddenly out of the void a small nimble feminine hand shot up! Nadia's hand! Mike didn't pause for a second as he yelled for help from anyone within earshot while grabbing it with his right hand. Using his free hand he shone the torch down to reveal what lay underneath. It struck him that Nadia felt strangely heavy for some one presumably standing on tip-toe and straining her hand upwards as she must have been . The tiny beam illuminated the terrible truth below him . Mike glimpsed parts of Nadia's face - her eyes wide open in a panic, her mouth quivering in horror , and her legs .....DANGLING IN MID-AIR!!

Mike blinked hard as if some how this would wipe away this nightmare scenario. But when he opened them and looked again only to be confronted with the same impossibility- ground that had originally been solid was now gone to be replaced by a fathomless darkness which seemed bottomless or at least if it

had a bottom Mike's little torch was unable to find it.!

"Don't worry baby I'll pull you up!" shouted Mike to the panic-struck Nadia too dumbstruck with shock to even utter another cry of help.

At once Mike realised that pulling up Nadia was going to be easier said than done almost half of his body was extended over the hole which had now been transformed into a pit and if he didn't manage to pull her up soon then she would drag him over the edge taking them both to their probable deaths or at least terrible injury although Mike knew that the latter possible consequence of their fall was just his incessant habit to be optimistic coming through as usual. In the cold light of honesty he knew that any fall down this bottomless pit meant a fall to one's death!

Without bothering to turn to his side he stretched back his hand carrying the torch to grip the edge of the pit in order to give him some sort of anchorage and maybe a false sense of security. All his hand could feel was thin air! The ground that had originally been there had disappeared , in disbelief Mike glanced round to see the edge of the hole where his hand was to help support him was in the process of disintegrating into rubble that bounded down the sides like miniature boulders in a race to the bottom.

"MIKE!" Nadia's cry chilled Mike to the bone, it sounded like a cry of pain a human might make before giving up the ghost. But this human was no ghost she was his Nadia she had to live!

"I'm here baby! I'm here!" Mike reassured her. He cursed himself for forgetting that by moving the torch he had left his poor Nadia in the dark by herself with only the touch of his hand to comfort and support her, at the moment it was the only thing that stood between her and death's door!

Using as much strength that he could muster Mike tensed his leg and feet muscles pushing them as far down into the earth in the vain hope that they could act as a weight that would stop his whole body from toppling over , but he realised the 'heaviness' of this weight depended on how much strength he had in his legs that would force them downwards while his precariously balanced position would be telling them to lift up! Nevertheless he still knew that pulling up Nadia was still well within his power despite the worsening dire circumstances.

Abandoning the idea of using his free hand as an anchor Mike immediately gripped her perspiring hand with it , his hold on her instantly strengthened and the pressure on his other hand and arm was instantly halved. It also gave the added advantage of him being able to shine the torch down onto her as she writhed about from her head down to her legs which seemed to be trying to make contact with ground that was no longer there.

At anytime Mike would have found it erotic to see her attractive body moving about in such a fashion - at anytime other than now! Right now all it was doing to Mike was making the act of pulling her up a thousand times harder.

"Nadia you've got to stop swinging ! Stay still and don't panic!" he

pleaded with her I'm not gonna let go of you!" he promised solemnly.

"I'm trying... but ...I can't" she managed to splutter out. "Help me please!" she begged sobbing as she started to cry uncontrollably.

"I will !I will!" he swore to her. Mike gathered his wits about him and continued to think through the situation as coolly and as logically as possible. He had a plan which he knew could and would succeed . The first step to strengthen his hold on Nadia had been accomplished . He now embarked on the second stage that of pulling her as close to the edge of the pit in order to facilitate the third stage that of actually pulling her out.

Wriggling back as if he were a snake he started to move back slowly but surely, while never taking his eyes of Nadia's silent terror- filled eyes. Although she was still writhing about it was much less than before which made his task dramatically less harder. He considered trying to shout for help again but realised that it would be stifled by the position that he was in as well as possibly panicking and therefore draining Nadia further whose grip on Mike's hand seemed to be growing weaker by the second.

Mike made steady progress as he moved back unhindered. 'Its working!' he thought jubilantly to himself .'Its actually working!'. All the time he could feel the reassuring pressure of earth under him supporting more and more of his body and bringing the catastrophic situation under more and more control.
He was now nearly in a position to start pulling her out of this hellish pit and put an end to this nightmare that they would no

doubt laugh about together at some time in the future.

Suddenly Mike saw out of the corner of his eye the beginnings of a shadow being cast over him , he breathed a sigh of relief and realised that help had finally arrived. he looked up to greet his fellow rescuers and thank them but there was no one above him! But there was SOMETHING above him! a large decaying trap door on the verge of slamming down on him that had been lifted up by a gust of wind! Mike tried not to think of what damage would be done to him when the heavy solid oak door landed on him.

At least he tried not to think about it! But in a split second the images of such a horrendous event still came to him. His skull would undoubtedly be crushed splattering his brain over the sunlight- basking green grass. But more tragically than that Nadia would fall to her doom! At least his death would be instantaneous and over in seconds. Nadia would have endure what would seem a lifetime of falling never knowing when death would come but always knowing that it would. She would have only terrified suffering to keep her company at the end!

In what was no doubt probably going to be his last living thought Mike bravely surmised hopefully that if Nadia could only cling onto his soon to be dead hand and if the door was heavy enough then it would anchor down his dead body therefore allowing her to cling onto life. Soon, very soon Mr Wood or Mrs Hawkins would notice that two people were missing from the class and go out to look for them. They would logically start searching the ruins first, they would soon be discovered, Nadia would be able to shout to

them what had happened and at least she would be saved.

Mike was amazed at how calmly he was thinking through the consequences and the manner of his own death , he supposed that being in love had taken away all fear from him and allowed him to think clearly and quickly. All that mattered now was that Nadia lived on after his death. He wondered what lucky man she would bring happiness to , happiness that might have been his.

In the last remaining seconds that he undoubtedly had left he still had time to call down to her some last words "Whatever happens Nadia don't let go baby!" he ordered but it was all in vain she already had! Only Mike's firm grip on her tender wrist prevented her free-fall descent.

Above him he heard the inevitable creak of the hinges as the trap door started its short sharp trip towards his skull. An obvious question dawned on him -How the hell had the wind managed to lift up the heavy door in the first place it just didn't seem feasible? Surely it would have taken a gale to accomplish such a dramatic feat!
There was no more time to debate the matter further as Mike hazarded a glance upwards and saw the fungus covered oak crashing towards him.

Although he had wanted to accept his death and go to it like a lamb he realised that such a sacrifice would be futile Acting on instinct Mike instantly put up his hand holding the torch to try and stop the path of the wooden monster. Though he had expected it to be heavy, even when he allowed for the fact that his hands were

exhausted it still felt too heavy , much too heavy as if there was a hurricane force wind pounding down on it at this very moment but the only clue to any sort of wind movement were the blades of grass around him that bent slightly in the gentle breeze.

He quickly dropped the torch so that his hand could get a better grip on this man-made skull crusher . He hoped against hope that somehow Nadia would catch the torch as it fell past her on the same route that she might be going but he knew that she wouldn't.

He could feel the same aches and pain resurfacing on the hand that was holding onto Nadia as it struggled to keep a grip on her wrist made slippery by their combined sweat.

If the pain that Mike was experiencing was bad then the pain that his hand holding the trap door up was absolutely excruciating and getting worse by the millisecond as the door proceeded to bend his hand back not allowing itself to be stopped by anything especially not the puny resistance that Mike's hand presented.

Lower and lower it got, inch by inch it got nearer and nearer to his face! No matter how much force Mike used to try and force the trapdoor back upwards the unseen power driving the door down managed not only to match it but also surpass it a hundred-fold.

Mike let out a cry of frustration and anguish as the seemingly hopeless situation became absolutely hopeless and the trap door made contact with his face driving his elbow and arm down into the beckoning earth. Mike could feel the pressure on his head now as the inevitable crushing process began on his skull. His hand

holding Nadia quaked in utter agony and he realised that he wouldn't be able to hold onto her for long, but he swore to himself this would only happen when his brain exploded out of its bony casing or if the pain made him mercifully pass out before death, but Mike was adamant that he would not allow the latter to happen he would be conscious to the end and hold onto his love as long as life allowed him to.

The pressure continued to build steadily at a tormentingly slow rate as if something wanted to make him suffer for as long as possible before delivering the final death blow. Mike felt his consciousness running away from him with the remained tatters of his will power racing after it but never catching it. He felt a slow trickle of something warm and thick running down the side of his face out of his eardrum and he knew then that death was only seconds away.

Mike couldn't hear anything from Nadia now her hand still felt warm but her pulse which he could feel in one of her veins had slowed to a crawl. He hoped this meant that she had passed out at least her death would be painless. She had gone to sleep and would never wake up maybe she would go to her death dreaming of them both together , maybe she shared the same regret that he had that they hadn't had more time together.
Mike closed his eyes tightly and prepared for the end. What happened next was a hazy blur, he felt his life and consciousness being stolen from him and the force of gravity claiming his Nadia.

Suddenly he felt a heavy weight being lifted from his shoulders

and his muscles relaxed gratefully in response. Strong hands gripped his shoulders and intruding voices asked frantic panicky questions but all these were just jabbering meaningless noises to him that intruded on his journey towards his eternal slumber dragging him back by the scruff of the neck.

"OH GOD!" were the first words that he clearly understood , he instantly recognised it as belonging to Mr Wood. There was no time for him to say anything else as Mike's grip on Nadia's hand loosened to a slack hold.

Mr Wood stood as still as a stone statue for a shocked second at the nightmare scenario that was before him. Somehow it all seemed surreal as if what he saw seemed straight out of some horror film. It had only been out of chance that Nadia and Mike's presence had been missed it was Carol a close friend of Nadia who had first alerted the others to the fact that the two had absconded together, a suggestive remark that had brought the obvious excited chatter and laughing from the girls and slightly embarrassed sniggers from the boys. After instructing his pupils to stay put he had started off on an earnest search for the romantic lost lambs! He had expected to surprise the young lovers in some embrace kissing or just innocently holding hands.

It had brought back fond memories of his first humorous fumblings with his first girlfriend. All this had simply compounded the feeling of shock and disbelief when he had seen the young boy with severe head injuries trapped under some sort of door that must have weighed a ton although it gave the misleading appearance of weighing much less. Lifting it had

caused him to break out into a sweat .
At first he had feared the worse and that the teenager must be dead then he had heard his shallow breathing relief from this lasted only momentarily when that turned to shock as he saw what Mike was holding onto- a small hand, but it was a small hand that he had almost completely lost a grip on. At once Mr Wood knew at once that it had to belong to Nadia even though the rest of the person couldn't be seen down that unnaturally dark hole despite the boy's pain he was using what little remained of his strength to stop that hand from slipping from his grasp, a grasp so determined to maintain that he was now in some sort of slow-motion manner being slowly dragged over the edge. Throwing himself downwards Mr Woods firmly placed one hand on the boy's shoulder to stop him from slipping any further while reaching out with his other hand...

Mike sensed that his ordeal was almost over and that help was near at hand, if he could just maintain the pressure on Nadia's fragile-looking wrist he knew that she would be saved, his fingers felt numb and stiff, his whole hand and arm felt as heavy as an iron bar. This was nothing however to how heavy Nadia felt to him now it was as if she weighed as much as an elephant he thought how much they would joke about
it on their way home it would be quite a tale to tell to the rest of the school they would be locally famous, perhaps he would be even considered a local hero!

Already in his mind he could see the banner headlines "LOCAL BOY SAVES HIS SWEETHEART" the interviews , the admiration as they both walked proudly down the school corridor

arm in arm or hand in hand just like they were now. HAND IN HAND! The word hand suddenly made Mike realise the dreadful truth his worse nightmare was turning into dire reality. He was loosing his grip on Nadia's hand.

It strangely perplexed him, he was sure that he was applying the same amount of pressure to her wrist as he had been a split - second before but it was of no use! It made no sense! He managed to prise open his heavy eyelids just enough to see another older hand reaching out over him towards Nadia's hand trying to make a connection with it but this last ditch effort was being hampered albeit very temporarily by her hand that had suddenly closed into tight fist forcing the more mature hand to reach down a little further to get some sort of live saving hold on her.

He felt Nadia's wrist slip down through his grasp a few more inches, once more putting Nadia's hand just out of reach of Mr Wood's rescue attempt. A horrible foreboding invaded his mind as the obvious yet terrible explanation for this came to him. SOMETHING WAS PULLING HER DOWN!

Mike scoured his mind and body for any secret untapped reserve of energy but there was none left to enable his grip to tighten which he was already struggling to maintain. He had nothing left inside to give he was totally spent his strength drained to the last drop drunk greedily by his muscular exertions.

Mr Wood felt like swearing in his frustration and would have if he had not conditioned himself to keep his language civil and

clean in front of his impressionable youngsters. Each time he made a grab at the hand it slipped down further just evading his straining fingers he had only moments but he knew that he would get her this time if-

All of a sudden Mike felt an unnaturally strong force WRENCH Nadia's wrist from him and saw her hand disappear into that dark dingy pit Mike opened his mouth but had no more energy for the heart-rending scream of anguish mixed with grief that he wanted to let out....

Mike spent two weeks in hospital, considering his ordeal the doctors thought it a miracle that he had no brain damage and soon all his wounds were healed at least his physical ones were. He knew that his internal unseen psychological injuries would never heal , he doubted whether he would really be able ever to forgive himself for not holding onto Nadia that extra second which would have meant life for her and forgiveness for him.

There had of course been a full inquiry into the whole tragedy, made mysterious by the fact that everyone was baffled how a girl could have vanished in a 7 foot deep hole! Despite a major search being carried out by an army of diggers and 2 diesel excavators the only thing they discovered under the hole was dirt and more dirt ! No body, no tunnels or other pits were found- ever!

At nights when he closed his eyes and his mind unearthed memories that were best left buried from that evil day. Mike remembered being carefully put in the ambulance, looking up at the sky and seeing that it had been blotted out by a sea of

concerned faces that crowded around him .
He could still picture that peculiar look of obsession on Nadia's flawless face and finally found the word that he been trying to find to describe that look. It had not been a look of someone obsessed it had been the look of someone POSSESSED!

Many years after those terrible events Mike revisited that same place, the ruins and trapdoor had now all been cleared away leaving a green tranquil field. There was nothing there now to remind him of the tragedy but that didn't matter his memories would remind him of that terrible event every night for the rest of his life!

As he was about to leave Mike could have sworn that he heard a small voice, a familiar voice calling his name from somewhere beneath the earth but as soon as he had heard it then it vanished in a passing summer breeze - forever.

THE PIT (PART 2)

As he gazed through the car windscreen at the crimson sky in which the sun was sinking Mike reflected that time didn't heal all wounds after all. His heart still ached for his childhood sweetheart Nadia every day, her cruel departure from him had left him with a permanent sadness in his heart-a gap that could only be filled by Nadia herself and which would therefore never be filled. Over the many years that separated that fateful day to this one he had managed to forgive himself for his human weaknesses and frailties during that moment that he had allowed Nadia to be torn from him - or at least he managed to forgive himself on good days when his mood was buoyant and upbeat. Unfortunately more often than not his mood was one of gloom which was reflected in his inability to come to terms and reconcile himself to events that were out of his control.

He tried to divert his attention and thoughts back to the present and the tasks in hand tasks that in their own way were linked to Nadia's disappearance and presumed death. Since that time propelled by grief and curiosity he had thrown himself into studying the supernatural in the remote hope that he might find some explanation for what had happened and why it had happened. It had started him on a long quest to find out the truth, a quest that had yet to yield him any satisfactory answers to his old questions.

Mike turned to his beautiful female companion who was driving-Francesca. As the name suggested she had Italian origins. Her

parents were from Southern Italy though she had been born in New York. The first time that Mike had seen her at a distance the first thing that had struck him about her had been her long luxurious black curly hair- something that Mike had noticed seemed to be the trademark of so many classically beautiful women with Italian blood.

They had both been students working for a parapsychology degree and it was not long before they had felt themselves magnetically drawn to each other, it was as though they both sensed that they had something in common -a sadness or regret. Although they were under no illusion about being able to dispel each other's sadness they were sure that they could at least comfort the other's solitary grieving.

Their differences in personality had fortified their relationship and given each of them a different outlook on viewing life and dealing with the daily bag of troubles that it brought with it. Mike's typical British cool had surprisingly gone well with Francesca's fieriness each element refining and shaping the other by helping to improve the short comings of the other's personality. Inevitably they had developed an intimate relationship and become 'an item' but had stopped short of engagement and marriage. Even though they loved each other deeply both wanted to finish their studies and improve their financial base before even seriously considering such a long term commitment. All of the above had of course been sound logical reasons for them not to get married and all of them had come from him! But Francesca being impulsive had tried to demolish each one with her Italian temper but in the end even she had to bow to the rules of common

sense and try to break the habit of following her heart instead of her head.

Deep inside Mike knew that these logical reasons were just excuses. He supposed he shared that common fear which so many men faced with the possibility of marriage face- that of entering into a contract that obligates them to stay with one woman for the rest of their life. This fear was made deeper by the fact that he knew that he wouldn't be able to surrender all of his heart completely to Francesca, there would always be a part of it that would always belong to Nadia.

They had both graduated with honours and managed to obtain a grant to begin a series of investigations into the paranormal the first of which they were now on their way to do. Mike turned back to face the unchanging white- lined road that stretched ahead, leaned back, closed his eyes and allowed himself to drift off into a fitful uneasy slumber.

Francesca quickly looked over to her dozing partner then turned her head back and tried to concentrate on the road ahead , the incessant succession of lines was starting to have an almost hypnotic effect and made her feel that she was on the verge of sliding into some sort of light trance. It was at times like these that she had wished that they had fitted a CB radio to their 4 wheel drive Cherokee truck, just so that she could have someone to talk to in order to break up the monotony and take her mind of the need to close her eyes for a minute, which if she did would most probably be her last minute on this earth!

Without taking her eyes of the headlight illuminated road she quickly gulped down the last of the stale black coffee from the white plastic cup that she had expertly balanced between her slender thighs since their last stop at a motorway restaurant . So far not a drop had been spilt- which she thought was a testament to the quality of her driving as well as the smoothness of the undulating road!

She swigged it all down in one go so as not to torment her taste buds with its horrendous taste again and again. She had always prided herself on being a coffee connoisseur and could tell the difference between so many blends. This one didn't even qualify as a cup of coffee in her well experienced opinion. It tasted positively poisonous to her, an opinion her upset stomach seemed to agree with , chances being it had been bought from some dodgy wholesaler.

Still she hadn't been drinking it for its taste only for its caffeine. Within seconds she felt the effect of the stimulate on her as a fresh surge of energy come over her totally revitalising her, but it was a surge that she knew would only last for a few minutes before disappearing and leaving her even more tired than she had been in the first place! It was at times like these that she wished that she was more like Mike who never touched the damn stuff. arguing the wide variety of toxic ingredients in it could only do the body more harm than good! Judging on what she had just drunk she was starting to think he might be right.

Although still asleep Mike shifted about uneasily and murmured

something under his breath. Distracted, Francesca glanced over to him and wondered what could make him sleep so uneasily, she could only guess that it had something to do with a childhood sweetheart who had died under strange circumstances -she knew nothing more. Not that she hadn't tried to get Mike to open up about it , but he always clammed up tight and refused to be drawn into any conversation that would provide her with the complete story no matter how hard she tried.

She had tried all different types of ploys to satisfy her curiosity- she had tried the sweet subtle approach and tried to coax the facts out of him. When that had failed she had tried the angry approach and tried to force it out of him with her hot fiery temper, but her fire had had no effect on his icy British cool and he had stayed silent. As hard as it was for her, she had come to accept that he would only talk about it when he was good and ready.

His behaviour over this single matter seemed so unfair to her, while she was willing to open up with complete honesty to any question that he posed, he was still not willing to share this particular secret with her , still that seemed to be the way that men generally were- not always willing to talk, while talking seemed to be one of a woman's favourite activities!

He wasn't the only one who had his own personal demons to exorcise she had her fair share as well. She had been an only child brought up in one of the toughest parts of New York - Hell's Kitchen . There had been a lot of love and romance between her mother and father during the early part of her life but gradually more and more this love had been replaced with hatred and

fights. The only solace which the small Francesca could seek from these domestic wars was in the refuge of her room, where she would bury her face in a pillow sobbing till the shouts and sickening thumps as her father's fists pummelled away at her mother had died away and had been replaced by her father's snoring as he slept off his drunkardness.

Only then would she dare venture out to see what damage had been done to a home that had become a battle ground. She never had to go far to see the first and only casualty. Her mother would be usually in the living room clearing up the damage that her father had done, often she had to grip her stomach almost doubling over with the pain from her husband's bruising punches as she limped pathetically along trying to make their house into a home again. As soon as they saw each other they would just burst out crying simultaneously Francesca because of the state of her mother and Francesca's mother because of the fact that her daughter should have to see her own mother in such a way.

Francesca would try to comfort her in the only way that a little child knows, by running up to her and embracing her but she would always be involuntarily pushed away by her mother because even her own daughter's embrace was too painful for her to bear and would cause her to flinch in agony. Francesca's little body pressing against her bruises would only aggravate the pain and cause her to go into a fit of agony so eventually all they would be able to do was just sit there side by side trying to comfort each other while weeping. If their unending tears had diverged together then they would have formed a river and that river in turn would have turned into a sea of sorrow between them.

Francesca woke up from her nightmare memories as a car screamed pass, its headlights blaring out into her eyes. She looked critically at herself in the rear-view mirror and saw to her embarrassment that her face and neck were drenched in sadness. she realised that the top part of her blouse felt sticky and tried to unpeel it from her pastel skin but it clung stubbornly to her body not through perspiration but though the tears that had raced down there like water from an overflowing cup.

Grabbing a wad of tissues out of a strategically well placed box sitting next to her she dried out her soaked face, while quickly glancing at Mike, quietly hoping that he had not seen her moment of weakness. Thankfully though Mike was dead to what was going on around him.

Although he had always been a pillar for her to lean on Franseca knew that he had his own set of troubles and she did not wish to burden his shoulders further, but just having his presence near her was comfort enough. He hadn't deserted her , hadn't rebuked her unlike her other boyfriends and had stuck with her through all her depressions.

She was surprised and upset over the fact that the evil of the past still had so much power over her in the present and the dead would not lie still and be forgotten as both her parents were now long dead and buried. Her sorry-excuse-for-a father had passed away first, his premature death brought on by liver failure an inevitable result of his habitual drunkenness, it had been a slow painful tortuous death , like the slow kind of psychological death

that he had inflicted on her mother and her.
He had been on his way home from a cheap bar on the sleazy side of town when his over worked liver had finally decided to opt for permanent retirement,clutching his side in desperate agony he had slipped heavily into the gutter with only the dog turds and cockroaches to keep him company. There he had laid while the passer-bys had done just that- 'pass by'- pretending not to notice the bloated drunk. In the course of time a street cleaning van and its crew had taken pity on him and finally called the ambulance service not chiefly out of altruism but out of the fact that he was in their way and they didn't want to bother themselves with shifting him. Anyway waiting for the ambulance gave them the excuse to take an unscheduled break and smoke some cigarettes while they waited for this human obstacle to be removed.

When the ambulance had finally crawled its way to her dying father through the grid-locked roads the medics had coldly slung him in the back like a slab of cold meat knowing that he had no health insurance and was another dead-weight to a notoriously over- privatised health system. Francesca and her mother had only discovered the news second- hand through their neighbour Mrs Brasky who had taken it for granted that they had already been told. Standing there shocked, her mother had gasped in panic and terror and would have crashed to the worn floor if she had not caught hold of Francesca's shoulder for support.

The reaction from Francesca could not have been more different! She had to use all her willpower to stifle a laugh and glee at the mishap that had befallen her hated father. All through their frantic preparations as they got ready to see him Fransesca had to

keep her back turned to her lament-stricken dear mother in order to hide her smiles, in the end just before they had left she had had to go to the bathroom and cry tears of joy. She felt like a death row prisoner given not only a reprieve but also an immediate parole!

All the way on the subway she had laughed quietly even out loud when her mother had not been too near. She felt over-joyed and happiness in her heart all the time -that is till she saw her Father.

She had never expected someone near death to look quite the way he did , but if she was honest with herself she wasn't sure what she had expected having not seen someone on their death bed before. With no insurance and no donor his death was now a forgone conclusion , the hospital had put him in one of those charity beds with slightly soiled sheets and had tried to make him as comfortable as possible with a morphine drip connected to him as a 'favour'.

His sheet white appearance wiped all happiness from her face and heart in a single glance. Her mother had immediately wept over him, begging him to pull through and hold on for a donor that they both knew would never come, but he was too tired to do a thing and lay there like a macabre wooden puppet.

Her mother prayed to God for her husband's deliverance and forgiveness hoping for a miracle and a second chance , but through all this wailing and beseeching Francesca's father had stared ahead, blind and deaf to the efforts that were being made vainly on his behalf.

A small yearning in Francesca's heart grew, a yearning that grew into a need, a need for reconciliation between her father and herself . Even through her anger at her father she could see that she needed to know that there was a part of him no matter how small that loved her mother and herself. A part that she would be able to love so that his death would not just leave a legacy of hatred and loathing behind. Stroking his frail limp hand gently Francesca leaned forward and kissed him tenderly on his cheek which felt cold and clammy. Then while holding his hand she leant forward over her still praying mother and whispered in his ears. "I forgive you Daddy and I love you Daddy" she started, then unable to control the words that she had wanted to say to him for so long continued "I hope you burn in hell you bastard!" They were the last words that he heard uttered before he died.

Drawing on his last breath his head slumped forward and his hand went limp. Francesca's mother looked up unbelieving that the person who had been so much a part of her life was now gone for good. At first Francesca had been confused and shocked by her mother's genuine grief. It didn't seem possible that someone who had so casually inflicted so much pain and suffering could possibly be worthy of so much grieving it seemed that it should be a time of rejoicing and preparing for a new start in their lives!

It seemed even more apt to rejoice when while cleaning out some old papers they stumbled across some insurance papers after her father's pauper funeral. The papers related to a life insurance endowment policy that he had forgotten to try and cash in . There of course wasn't much money in it but it enabled Francesca's

mother to give her daughter the educational chances that she never had so in her usual self-sacrificing fashion gave it to Francesca for her to help pay for her college tutorial fees.

Sometimes the now more mature adult Francesca would reflect sadly on those last reviling words that she had spoken to her father. She tried to comfort herself with the thought that he hadn't heard them, perhaps by then the morphine had taken his mind to another imaginary place where negative emotions and angry words could not touch him. Though at other times Francesca looked back to that turbulent time and marvelled at how much self-control she had exercised as a young child and how self-restrained she had been not to say those words sooner. She realised that it would do her no good to blame herself to any degree as she would only succeed in destroying her sanity. The guilt and blame rested totally and squarely on her father's shoulders not on her's and not on her mother's.

Not long afterwards her darling mother had given up the ghost, the Doctor had said it was a broken heart that killed her. But at least her death had been quick and painless, she had simply gone to bed one night and not woken up the following morning her dead face frozen in an expression of tranquil beauty - a sign that her suffering in this world had at last ended. Francesca cried as soon as she saw her, not only tears of grief but also tears of relief mixed with tears of regret that she hadn't been able to give her the things that she had deserved.

"We're nearly there yet?" enquired her sleepy companion stirring slowly from his short nap.

"Not by a long shot!" Francesca retorted.
The sun had by now sunk without trace leaving behind an unlit sky not even illuminated by the night light of the moon. They had only the twin headlights from their Cherokee Truck to point their way to their destination.
"So what do we know about this place- a part from the fact that its supposed to be haunted?" questioned Mike inquisitively.

"Didn't you read the background research notes I gave you?" exclaimed Francesca.

"Why should I when I've got you to do it for me?" he replied gleefully with a cheeky grin on his face. "just run through the main points for me darling OK?"

Francesca sighed despairingly at her partner's laziness, although she knew his lack of time for such important reading up had been mainly her fault by leaving the organisation and planning of this trip all to him! He had without hesitation taken on these important responsibilities leaving her with the much easier task of going to local libraries sitting down and researching information on this suspected centre of paranormal behaviour. While she had been leisurely doing this her poor Mike had been running about making sure that everything was ordered , paid for and received. Some nights he had got in so late and tired that he had fallen asleep before he could even say goodnight to her! To ask her to give him some more details about the house they were going to seemed a very small deed in comparison to Mike's near miraculous powers of organisation.

"Well the original house Winthorpe manor was built in the 1600s on the sight of a desecrated church which in turn had been built on a spot where regular pagan rituals had occurred- possibly druid sacrifices." she started to lecture .

"Yeah I know all that baby!" interrupted Mike in a the bored heard -it-all before manner that almost inflamed her Italian - American fiery temperament.
"Tell me more details about the murders baby-the murders!" he had a edge to his voice that Francesca found a bit unnerving . It was a tone of a person who relished hearing all the gory details about a murder, a kind of sick aural voyeurism but then she saw no reason why she should be surprised. After all that was the way he'd always been since she had known him. He was never one to shirk away from the messy duties, even if that meant disposing of the odd spider that might find its way into their flat, something that Francesca wouldn't have had the stomach to do.

"The murders." she began authoritatively, " began shortly after a wealthy businessman- a Mr Winthorpe bought the land for next to nothing!"

"Hardly surprising given its history the town council must have been itching to get it off their hands!" interjected Mike "What the hell made him buy it anyway? He knew the land's pass history!"

"He couldn't resist a bargain! He also knew that there were no such things as ghosts-or so he thought!" she added with a wry

smile."The first fully documented death to occur on that site was one of the builders - a Mr Giny who died aged 28, he's buried in the town cemetery."

"What happened?" inquired Mike almost breathless with curiosity.

"No one knows exactly its thought that he must have stayed behind well after dark trying to get as much of the trenches for the foundations dug as soon as possible before an expected storm arrived. When the other builders arrived the next day they found the trenches for the foundations all filled in with land as if Giny had been undoing the work that they had done. They quickly started digging out the trenches angrily cursing him frequently and wondered what had come over him to act so simple! It didn't take long for them to discover the answer! After digging for a short while one of them struck upon something quite hard.-"

"Giny!" cried out Mike triumphantly as if he was back art primary school giving the answer to a question that no one else seemed able to answer.

"No not Giny!" admonished Francesca sharply. " At least not all of Giny-it was one of his boots buried in the trench! As I'm sure you can imagine everyone got a little jittery but they still kept on digging it was then that they started to dig up the body parts- first it was a hand then a foot, a chunk of flesh that perhaps belonged to a torso or a neck, by the time they got to the last trench most of the building team had fled the site , only the foreman and his assistant remained, it was they who found the head, it was a sight that haunted them for the rest of their lives. You see from the

expression on the face it looked like he had been buried alive."

"You mean some sicko buried him alive then dug him up dismembered him and spread the poor soul's pieces along the foundation trenches?" a shocked Mike asked (though he had expected the murders to have been gruesome this seemed beyond the usual level of pre-mediated callousness!).

"Firstly" explained Francesca " when you say 'Sicko' that suggests a who- a person, we're not necessarily talking about a person we could be talking about a what- a thing!"

"What makes you say that? Any human was physically capable of that particular act of murder" Mike logically concluded.

"Secondly" continued Francesca as if she was ignoring the question posed by Mike. "Evidence points to the fact that poor Giny was dismembered while he was still buried alive in the soil! Now what human in the 1600's could do that?"

"What evidence?" demanded Mike sceptically. He had read too many cases of frauds and cons in relation to the supernatural for him not to question every piece of evidence and each supposedly true fact that was presented to him. It was a tried and tested analytical routine between them, geared to bring up the weak part in any argument that there was an active supernatural force present. Francesca never took it to mean that Mike disbelieved in the supernatural. She also realised that it was also quite a good way for him to check that she had done her reading up homework!

"The inquest reports at that time notes the fact that there were puddles of water situated at certain intervals along the trench about the same size etc. from the short sharp storm experienced at about 11pm that night. Witnesses say they heard a long human scream for help followed by muffled screaming from the approximate location of the murder at approximately at 11pm just before the rainfall, suggesting that he was bound and buried alive at that time. If he had been dug up and dismembered how else could there be puddles of water spread evenly along the trench!"

Mike almost laughed "Is that your evidence there are a thousand different ways that could have happened -I know it and you know it" he mocked.

"I know that but the evidence at least points to the possibility doesn't it?" Francesca surmised.

"The possibility?-Yes" pondered Mike "but the likelihood?-No!"

They both descended into a meditative silence both mulling over the points that the other one had made and preparing for the next bout of the 'cerebral' heavy weights!
Francesca kept a watchful eye on the road ahead , while Mike stared at the autumn leaves that fled from their speeding path.

It was Francesca who threw the first punch metaphorically "Not all the deaths can be written off so easily as to having no supernatural involvement!"
"Tell me more!" Mike shrugged " I'm listening!"
" Well first you have to realise" began Francesca carefully "is that

whatever has been written, whatever I know , whatever I tell you is simply the tip of the iceberg , there must be countless of other cases , murders even sacrificial murders dating back to pagan times, that have gone unrecorded unreported! We'll never know exactly how seeped in blood Winthorpe Manor is!" she pointed out.
"Your point being!" asked Mike in a very laid back casual manner.
"My point being-" started Francesca , slightly irritated by his couldn't care less attitude.
"Your point being " interrupted Mike smugly "that even if I shoot down each case you present to me there are still thousands of cases that we have not found out about and which we may never find out. Therefore any conclusion which we reach here is simply not conclusive!"

"Exactly!" Francesca replied through gritted teeth, irritated by his smugness.
"Well your point's been taken and noted! Now tell me some more cases for me to shoot down!" He said smiling. his over-confident manner striking a hollow cord with Francesca.
"Well there is one case that sticks in my mind!"
"Oh?" asked Mike surprised "Why's that?"
"For the sheer depravity and bloodiness of it!" she stated.
"Tell me more!" Mike demanded, his interest having been stoked up into a fire.
"According to the old magistrate records stored in the local church it happened on a dark night like this. The house was finally finished by that time but there had been several accidents and disappearances during its construction, so many actually that the

Mr Windthorpe ended up having to pay his workers double the going rate then triple, but eventually nobody in the village wanted to work on that cursed ground and obviously valued their lives more highly than any high wage that they might be offered.

In the end he had to get labour from surrounding towns making sure that none of them went into the village so that they wouldn't be scared away by the rumours and past incidents. Even then he had to change the towns where he got the unsuspecting men from for either some how strange and terrifying rumours would reach them or they would go back home complaining of scary and unexplained incidents and never return! But eventually the house was finished much later then had been expected and certainly much more expensively than Mr Winthorpe had anticipated, he had to sell several business interests just to keep the building going!"
"Sounds to me as if he didn't know when to quit, he should have sent cut his losses and pulled out." commented Mike wisely.
"I thought of that myself it would also appear that many of his close associates thought that too and begged him to build his dream country mansion elsewhere, but he wouldn't listen to anyone -he seemed unnaturally obsessed with building that house as if he was driven by some strange force!"
"How do you know all that? They wouldn't keep comments like that in government records!" argued Mike.
"Maybe not but its the sort of information that they would keep in a diary!" Francesca shot back quickly.
"What diary?" enquired Mike dubiously.
" A diary belonging to a Mr Sallis a lawyer living in the village who was helping to take care of Mr Winthorpe's financial affairs,

he was also good friend of his."
"A lawyer with a friend- now that is unusual!" joked Mike.
Ignoring Mike's lame attempt at humour as she usually did, Franseca continued.
"Anyway after the house had been finished Mr Winthorpe moved in with his wife Margaret and their 3 children Ann aged 8 , Julie aged 9 and Sara 14 . Despite numerous offers by the parish vicar the Right Reverend John Gilmore, Mr Winthorpe totally forbid any attempt to have the house blessed , not really surprising as the man was an atheist who believed in neither heaven or hell, unlike his wife who was a devout Christian who endeavoured to give her children a God-fearing upbringing. In the past her husband had always preferred to leave the spiritual health of the family to his wife while he concentrated on the financial well being of his offspring and wife. That suddenly and bizarrely changed , the children and their mother who were once regular churchgoers were suddenly noticed to be continuously absent from the Sunday morning service that they use to never miss. Any attempt to visit the family by the vicar was met by a sharp rebuke by Mr Winthorpe who always came to the door and made in clear that they were to be left alone!"

After a while, tired of the verbal tirade of abuse he suffered each time he tried to pay a visit the vicar gave up coming and had to content himself with including a special prayer for them. Villagers also noticed a change in Mr Winthorpe's family, not only were they seldom seen but his children no longer went to the local school anymore. The excuse proffered to the teachers was that they were being educated at home by their father- a prospect that seemed daunting seeing that this excuse was scribbled in the form

of a barely legible note on a dirty scrap of paper and contained numerous spelling and grammatical errors! Eventually the family weren't seen in the village at all and became the subject of much conjecture and gossip especially at how the once wealthy businessman had let his wealth slip between his fingers through neglect and bad decisions taken against the advice of his lawyer Mr Sallis!"

"How about this lawyer friend of his didn't he try and check on him! Or did he just dump him when his financial fortunes took a downfall!" Mike queried.
"According to his diary he did try but like the vicar it was to no avail-all his efforts met with the same response! He wasn't even allowed to come in and say hello to Mr Winthorpe's wife and children -something which struck him as something very strange and disturbing! Well at the end of the day eventually the village forgot about the Winthorpes just like the Winthorpes seemed to have forgotten about the village. That was until the dancing began!"
"Dancing? What did that have to do with the murders?" grilled Mike who was now getting more and more irritated along with perplexed. He had always noticed Francesca's habit not to get straight to the point when telling him about a situation or story. It was as if she enjoyed tying to work as much tension and suspense into it. That would work fine if she was reading a bedtime story to a child but not in this case when she was recounting a true-life event to an adult!
"All will be revealed if you give me a little time , but I have to tell you about each piece of information or it will be like me giving you a jigsaw with some of the pieces missing!" she

explained.
"Alright! Alright!" he replied with a tone of surrender in his voice. Mike had by now resigned himself to the fact that no matter how hard he pushed they weren't getting to the most important part till Francesca was ready!

"Well this wasn't any usual form of dancing! It was first seen by a local poacher John Hawkins who spilled what he had seen over a pint of ale at the local pub with his hands still shaking in shock from what he had experienced!

He had been passing near Winthorpe Manor when he had seen 5 shadowy figures moving about on the grounds just outside it, curious he had moved forward using the trees as cover for a closer inspection. It was then that he noticed that there seemed to be a kind of rhythmic and pattern to their step and he realised that they were in the middle of some sort of strange dance , but due to the night he couldn't see the faces but guessed that it must be the Winthorpes by the size and height of the figures , but something wasn't right ,not only with the timing and the lack of an apparent reason for their silent dance but more strangely with the clumsy and misshapen way they moved. Their backs were all turned to him when and as he felt a little more curious than scared he moved forward right to the very edge of the surrounding wood . Just as he poked his head from around a tree for an even closer inspection the tallest of the forms who he presumed to Mr Winthorpe started to turn round! Unfortunately our intrepid investigator cum thief couldn't take any more and with his fear in full command of him took flight into the haven of the night while all the time wondering with dread what that face might have

looked like!

Anyway next day there was a town meeting with the people demanding for something to be done as there was the general consensus that something evil was going on in that family! An angry mob formed at the head of them the chief magistrate determined to look good in front of the towns folk who had elected him.

Chanting angry slogans they made their way to the house marching boldly and quickly, but as soon as the grey bricked house came into view a hush came over the mob and their pace slowed down to crawl each of them not wanting to be the first to reach the house. Finally when they were about 50 feet away from the door the crowd came to a full-stop, only the Chief magistrate continued onwards for a few steps then looked back at the crowd behind him who were staring at him willing him on, so taking a deep breath he strode forward and knocked loudly at the door. When there was no answer he must have felt like thanking his lucky stars and turning back there and then but he knew that he couldn't do that, his civic duty demanded that he got to the bottom of this. Pushing the door he found it to be unlatched and entered Winthorpe Manor, its said that what he saw turned his hair grey overnight, the next day it all fell out and that night he died in his sleep, plagued by the nightmares of what he had seen!"

" What? What did he see?" pleaded Mike almost on the edge of his seat in anticipation.
"The records don't say, all I know is that the magistrate went in for a few minutes and came out with a face of death he then gave the

order for no one else to enter and for torches to be immediately thrown into the place so that it would be burnt to the ground. His orders were duly carried out but he refused to tell anyone what he had seen except that the Winthorpes were all dead! Soon all that remained of the manor house was some blackened rubble mixed in with the ashes of its victims.
"But what did the magistrate see?" Mike asked unable to believe his ears , his girlfriend had kept him listening to this damn story for so long only to be unable to provide the most important part of the jigsaw!
"There's nothing in the official records" she reiterated. "but -" and paused.
"But what Fran?" Mike's palm felt strangely clammy as if he had just been given some bad news. He looked at the rear-view mirror into Francesca's eyes and saw that even the storyteller was being scared by the story that she was telling.

"Go on Fran. Its all in the past! Tell me what you found out!" he whispered gently to her while squeezing her wrist gently in encouragement .

Francesca took a deep breath and parked onto the side of the empty road unable to drive and say what she was about to tell Mike. After turning off the engine, she rested her hands on her knees to try and steady them but Mike noticed her arms trembling and put out his hands to steady them.

"What is it Fran? What did you find out ?" he asked once more in a gentle manner while rubbing one of her shoulders therapeutically. After a moment Francesca turned round to face

him her beautiful big brown eyes looking intently at him.

"When I looked in some other archives I happened by chance to come across the diary of the magistrate's widow, it talks about-" Francesca shivered ,closed her eyes then finding the strength to recover her composure opened them again. and continued "in her diary it spoke about the nightmares her husband suffered in his sleep the night before he died, it says how he spoke in his sleep , she believed that what he spoke is what he saw in that house!"

"Which was what Fran?" coaxed Mike.
Despite the fact that she was looking directly at him Fransesca looked as if she was staring pass him at some other imaginary world and when she spoke it was not the voice of the adult Francesca he knew and loved but instead sounded more like that of a frightened little girl who has just seen something that she would not even dare dream about .

"The widow speaks of her husband crying out that he found the bodies of the family each in their own rooms each laid out on their own bed as if they were taking a nap but their flesh had turned putrid , maggots and cockroaches feasted on their eyeballs and had entered their brains causing them to be bloated with their eggs and were on the verge of bursting open their bony skulls. Moths had gnawed away at their clothing leaving the remains of their thick woollen clothes hanging in tatters over their human frames. He knew immediately that they had been dead for a long time and whatever the poacher Tom Hawkins had seen dancing the night before had not been the living- but the dead!"

Francesca stopped talking as if to allow the full horror of what she had just said sink into Mike -for him to get used to it and come to terms with it before she continued. But it looked to Mike as though she was still coming to terms with what she had learnt and needed time to collect her wits and keep them in a locked box in case they fled her and insanity set in!

It was at these times that Mike realised the truth of the saying "Ignorance is bliss". Certainly it would have been easier for Francesca if she didn't know some of the things that she knew and even though the descriptions she had used were gruesome, she had said nothing that had chilled him. What Francesca said next did chill him -to the bone!

"The magistrate could clearly see through all the gaseous stench and the insect infested corpses that there was something wrong with the shape of the bodies." Francesca's voice had lost none of its frightened tone and quavered accordingly. "He then realised that what had happened was that someone had dismembered the bodies mixed up the pieces then snitched them back together again like some macabre human jigsaw puzzle. Sara's head had been snitched back onto her mothers over-sized chest while one of the arms seemed to belong to that of a man while the other belonged to that of a young toddler possibly Julie, the hairy legs also evidently belonged to that of a man the father- Mr Winthorpe! Little Anna had what was left of her small head snitched back onto her father's chest which had two legs obviously belonging to a small child snitched onto it the arms were of unequal size and length. One belonging to that of an adult woman the other to that of a small child. Need I go on?"

Her question at the end was asked as if she was begging Mike to say that he had heard enough. Mike shook his head silently, he could already feel the nausea building up in his stomach and which now threatened to burst through his sphincter muscle up his oesophagus along his throat and out his mouth over the smart upholstered mahogany dashboard. He grabbed a bottle of mineral water and gulped down the cool liquid in an attempt to stop the tidal wave of vomit creeping its way steadily towards the light -thankfully it worked . He looked back up at Francesca her face ashen white as if what she had said had brought back other dreadful memories best left forgotten dead and buried beneath the soil of time.
"Who could have-" she started to say.
"Not who Francesca but what! We're not talking about a human being we're talking about a force-an evil force and whatever it is - it could be waiting for us in Winthorpe Manor!"
Francesca nodded stiffly and turned the key in the ignition, nothing happened -she turned it again, nothing happened -the engine had died. The car was dead.

They looked at each other shocked not knowing quite what to say, the Cherokee truck was after all new. It had undergone a thorough MOT, the petrol tank had been filled up it and it had an advanced ignition system that allowed the engine to start in blizzard conditions even if it had been switched off overnight. It made no logical sense! It was Mike who first broke this verbal silence.
"I'll check under the bonnet, turn the key when I tell you Fran OK!" he said as he sprung out into the cold night air. Francesca nodded in recognition her bottom lip quivering nervously.

Mike opened the bonnet and immediately regretted his idea to try and fix whatever was wrong. The engine was a mass of wires , screws , different shaped pieces of metal and looked like some form of advanced alien technology to him. Fixing car engines were not his forte , prudently he had brought out a torch and the trouble-shooting text nook that had come with the car . Flicking quickly to the necessary page he quickly thumbed through the main points following the instructions diligently and checking the necessary engine components thoroughly.

"Any luck?" Francesca called out hopefully as she leaned out the window.
"Not yet!" he replied, the dark cloud of moodiness growing in the back of his mind with only his love for Francesca keeping it in check.

Mike tugged some wires to check that they were firmly in place and poked his head from out of the bonnet. "Try it now Fran" he shouted back to her , the tone of his voice almost betraying the hopelessness he felt about the predicament that they had landed in.

Francesca gave the ignition key a firm turn , still the engine gave no reply except a stony silence. She shook her head, her face displaying all the disheartedness that Mike felt but was afraid to show. He let his shoulders drop and buried his head back under the bonnet in the vain hope finding the solution to a problem which perhaps had no solution.

While Mike pottered about with the ins and outs of the engine ,

it gave Francesca time to reflect on the past and those who had gone before them to investigate Winthorpe Manor obviously not the original building that had burned down but the one rebuilt by a distant relative who had inherited the land from that doomed family. Through the centuries there had been other tragedies and possible supernatural paranormal incidents. Through it was not until the early 1900s that there was an official, thoroughly documented investigation into the spiritual activity within its walls.

This investigation had been led by a well known professor called Professor Leylin who had written extensively and widely on the topic, his books were widely read and he was a well renowned authority on the subject. There had been three others with him his assistant and photographer Mr Marl, and a Ms Geraldine Jay a well known psychic at that time, whose powers had been tried and tested, both under a controlled situation in a lab as well as out in the field in 'sittings' held with a fee paying audience, where she would claim to be contacted by the dead. Even Scotland Yard were able to authenticate her power as she had on occasion been able to assist in the search for suspected victims of murder, where the suspected murderer was on verge of getting away with his crime solely because the suspected murder victim had not yet been found. The remaining member of the team had been a complete sceptic of the supernatural - a Professor Daser a friend of Professor Leylin who taught Physics. It had been a wise choice to include such a "non-believer" in their group as their hopefully positive results of their investigation would be more believable if they were able to convert a non-believer like Professor Daser that there was another world beyond this one.

During that single fateful night of their investigation, that was filled with freak happenings, strange noises and sights Mr Marl the photographer was left totally blinded for reasons unknown. Photography had been the great love of his life , the vibrant shades and wonder of it had meant everything to him without it he felt useless and shortly after the introduction of colour photography his depression got deeper and he committed suicide.

Ms Geraldine Jay came out a gibbering mad woman who spent the rest of her life locked in a padded cell wearing a strait-jacket, eventually dying from a massive cerebral stroke.

Professor Daser was left completely paralysed, he wasn't even able to twitch a single muscle in his body , no one could find a solution for it or provide a remedy and he had to be cared for by nurses for the rest of his life. Due to the specialist care needed he was confined to a hospital bed 24 hours a day looking up at the ceiling perhaps thinking -but no one was sure what he was thinking and if he could think at all! On occasions the nurses would put him in a wheelchair and take him out on the hospital grounds for some fresh air, but more often than not they tended to forget about him and leave him in the corner on his bed , changing the bedpan twice a day and force feeding him three times a day. At first they did of course exercise his legs and arms but in time his joints became mysteriously solid and immovable so exercise became pointless as well as obviously impossible. His family and friends found it much to painful to see someone who was once so active in mind and body now in such a forlorn and helpless state so eventually they stayed away and left him to his

slow lingering death which mercifully ended for him a year later.

Perhaps the worse fate though was reserved for Professor Leylin who ironically staggered out of that single night of hell miraculously unharmed or at least it seemed for the first few months- then the murders were committed. His whole close family his wife and children were all killed their heads broken open with a sledge hammer. He was the police's one and only suspect especially as he had confessed without reservation about the deed as if it was something to be proud of. He refused to plead insanity and during the short trail when asked why he had done something so evil, gleefully told the judge that he had seen the other side and had wanted to send his family to that "better place". He was of course sentenced to death by hanging which was to be carried out in the prison 2 weeks later.

All through the trail he had showed no remorse or grieving for what he had done , his face fixed with the look of someone not in touch with reality. Though as soon as he had been led handcuffed to the bare condemned cell it was as if a veil had been lifted and he saw the true evil and depravity of what he had done!

All through those terrible two weeks he neither eat or drank , he just cried for his family. When he was led on that final walk to the hangman's noose he had degenerated into a shadow of a man and mumbled away pitifully. Even when the noose was being placed round his neck he yelled out tearfully and forlornly for forgiveness for the fact that he had been tricked and misled into committing his evil deeds. He would have rambled on if they had allowed him to but it was getting late so the signal was given and

the hangman pulled the lever putting an end to his crazy ramblings and despatching his soul to whatever hell that he had been tricked into.

There were no such fates awaiting other teams that had dared enter that unholy relic, they had either given up or not stayed a full night, except that is for the last team that had tried to solve the mystery of Winthorpe Manor a few years ago. That team had consisted of students who were carrying out a university project their fate had been a puzzle. They had simply gone in and not come out. Their videotapes had been erased and there was no trace of them remaining, it was as if they had vanished into thin air...

The car door suddenly swung open making Francesca jump with shock.

But it was just Mike, who slid back into the passenger seat slamming the door hard behind him hoping that it would barricade him against the cold and its icy tentacles.

"Its no good!" he shook his head despondently "I've been through that engine with a fine tooth-comb I couldn't find a damn thing wrong with it ! Try it again Fran!"

Francesca complied and gave the ignition key several twists, but non yielded any tangible result from the frozen engine. Bewildered she looked at Mike not knowing what else could be done. Mike turned a way from her helpless gaze and stared out into the shadowy night before letting out a long sigh as he sank back into his seat. After a short pause he turned back to her.

"We've got a simple choice either we can call out a breakdown crew to take us back to town which could take hours and delay our investigation, or we can use the back packs that have got all our gear in and hike our way to the house" he offered blandly.
"Hike? In the darkness?" Francesca replied in disbelief that he could seriously be considering such a hair brain option.
"Its not as crazy as you think! " he challenged "We've got maps in the glove compartment. I know where we are and if we cut across the woods we can be there in about 30 minutes!" His words though they may had made sense held no sway with her and she still continued to stare at him as if he had lost his mind!
"I don't care Mike! I'm not walking about in the dark . THAT'S FINAL!" she stated a tone of finality in her voice.
Mike knew that tone well, it was tone best not argued with -but at the same time he knew those last two words she used just as well and with Francesca nothing was final. She really was capable of changing her mind at the drop of a hat!
"OK!" he surrendered with no resistance "I'll call them up on the mobile" he told her as he took out his sleek black digital phone and called for help.

Mike punched in the phone number and waited patiently while listening to the 5 second silence that usually preceded connection. Two minutes later Mike was still listening to that five second silence. Annoyed by the inefficiency that he was experiencing with this so called state-of-the art phone he angrily punched the keys, again nothing.

"What's the matter?" Francesca asked concerned.

Knowing that Francesca was a born worrier who always seemed to blow up every drama into a crisis Mike tried to fob her off with some excuse for the poor service. "Must be a wrong number or something! " he said quickly making sure that his answer was vague so that any one of a multitude of sins could be blamed for this delayed connection time.

The first time that Mike had been unable to get through a nagging doubt had started to stir and with each failure that he had experienced in connecting, that nagging doubt had grown larger and more virulent by the second. Soon it had developed into a real worry that had made him realise that perhaps this was one of the occasions when Francesca would be right to make a crisis out of a situation. He had just dialled the emergency services, the police , ambulance anyone who might be able to help and he still wasn't getting through! Just like the engine, the phone had just died on them.

"What's the matter Mike? Haven't you spoken to anyone yet?" interrogated Francesca her eyes pleading for some sort of answer, any answer as long as it comforted her and stopped the panic that was growing in her pupils from taking completely over. She didn't get the reply she wanted!

"Maybe the batteries are running down or leaking. I just can't get anyone on this useless overpriced crap!" Mike sighed . He had tried to give the reasons for the malfunction first before telling her that there actually was a malfunction in the vain hope that it might some how soften the bad news. It didn't!.

"But the phone's new Mike and the batteries were just charged up yesterday!" she argued back.

Francesca could feel the panic inside her spreading like a wild fire across her brain. It was making her dizzy and causing an unpleasant churning feeling in her stomach and abdomen as if a little person was inside tying them up into knots.

"There's got to be some logical reason for it-" Mike replied stupefied by the problem as he squirmed uncomfortably in his seat like when he was a schoolchild who was once asked a question by the head teacher in front of the whole school that he couldn't answer. He realised that the situation now was a thousand times worse! At least after that embarrassing predicament then the worse he had only wished that he was dead for a day or two. In this situation if they couldn't get help and had to go into the woods or wait in the car they might well end up dead without having to wish for it!

Mike was a little comforted by the fact that their car had shatter-proof glass and an internal locking system. He didn't know who might be lurking about outside, watching and waiting to pounce. It could be car-jackers it might even be a wild animal! Mike had no doubt that the sturdy car would keep possible assailants at bay but he doubted that it could stand up to a sustained determined onslaught by anyone or anything that wished to do them harm. Still he was just probably being excessively paranoid and was reacting in tandem to Francesca's panicky nature. This was a straight- forward problem with a straight- forward solution! They would simply hike the remaining short distance to the house, he

knew for a fact that there was a phone there which was still connected- he had used it to speak to the caretaker several times on it while making the preparations for their investigation.

Deep inside though Mike knew that there was nothing simple about it! If he misread the map which could so easily occur in the night as there would be no landmarks clearly visible they could end up going round and round in circles and a 30 minute stroll could be transformed into a 3 hour nightmare!

"We must be in a poor reception area!" he surmised resolutely to Francesca, but he was careful not to look at her directly in case she saw the doubt in his eyes and seized the chance to exhibit even more frayed nerves. "We've got no choice now we've got to walk it! Staying here won't do us any good!"

" No Mike !" she protested in vain with the tone of someone who knows that they have already lost the a fight.
"It will be alright darling I'll get us there in no time!" he reassured her as he gently rubbed her hand to try and get some warmth back into it. "The house has got a working phone we can leave the car here and get it towed back tomorrow or maybe even tonight -you know it makes sense!"

Francesca looked at Mike into his dark masculine features and nodded reluctantly. Despite the task in hand Mike couldn't help but admire the ethereal beauty and innocence that his girlfriend exuded no matter what the situation. No matter how much she tried to frown or look angry that face of hers always ended up looking like it belonged in a pre-raphalite painting masterpiece!

He leaned forward and kissed her lightly .

"Let's go and get our stuff together!" he whispered gently to her while he took her delicate hand and led her out of the car into the blindingly dark night.

They walked quickly over to the car boot hand in hand. Francesca managed to resist the urge to break out into a panic stricken rush mainly thanks to Mike's large hand that had wrapped itself protectively round her delicate fingers, which made her feel safe and sound.
Mike fumbled for the car boot keys and was just on the verge of opening it when Francesca lamented "This is all my fault Mike I shouldn't have stopped!"
Mike immediately stopped what he was doing and sternly looked directly at her. "Don't even think that! Its not your fault that the engine doesn't start when it should start! And its not your fault that the mobile phone doesn't work when it should work OK?"

Francesca gave him a slight timid nod.

"OK?" repeated Mike unhappy with her subdued response. This time her nod was much more pronounced and she actually managed a small smile! Much happier Mike opened the boot with the intention of taking an inventory of their stock before moving off and started to unzip one of the backpacks stacked in the boot.

"Do you really have to go through it all? I mean you are sure you packed it all aren't you?" Franseca asked guessing correctly what

Mike's intentions were.
"You know what I'm like with this things!" he explained "I always like to double-check these things just to be on the safe side!" he continued as he took out a check list and started to rummage through the items.
"Yeah I know what you're like alright - you and your 'check-everything- a -million-times complex'!" she remonstrated.
"It will only take two minutes I've got it down to a fine art!" Mike reassured her.
"That's two minutes too long to be hanging about in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere!" she ranted.

Mike sighed quietly under his breath, the last thing he needed was for a minor disagreement to degenerate into a full -blown shouting match . He had too many things on his mind already too contemplate, too many questions without answers!
"No problem baby. I can do the item check when we get to the house." He replied in an attempt to exonerate himself from this tricky situation.
"Good idea!" congratulated Francesca as she reached down to pick up her backpack. Mike grabbed it first. "Turn around I'll help you put it on." he offered.

Francesca gratefully accepted his assistance and immediately turned round for Mike to help lift the lighter of the two packs on to her back while she adjusted the dangling waist straps for maximum comfort.
"How does it feel?" a concerned Mike enquired as Francesca busied herself with loosening and tightening the straps.
"It feels fine thanks!" she replied in a clipped tone which told

Mike loud and clear that all that she wanted to do was get moving.
"Well if its too heavy let me know and I can take some of the things out and carry them myself OK?" he instructed her.
"Don't worry I'll be fine- can we get going now Mike?" she replied impatiently.

"Give me a second Fran!" answered Mike as he tried to heave his heavy backpack on. Francesca quickly came to his aid and held the pack steady while Mike made sure that it felt as comfortable as possible which due to its weight was not an easy task! Finally he managed to get the right level of balance so that the reinforced nylon backpack straps did not chaff him skin too badly through his body warmer.
"Well I'm all set and ready to roll!" Mike exclaimed enthusiastically eager to get on with the trip. He carefully rechecked their position on the map and pin-pointed their position under torchlight to Francesca.

"We're here!" he stated confidently as his gloved hand pointed to their present location .
"The house is just here!" he continued as he traced their proposed path through a light brown shaded area which represented the woods that they would have to journey through.

Francesca looked worriedly at the wooded area "It looks a pretty large area! Are you sure we can get through it in such a short space of time?" she asked worried.
"Do me a favour and trust me!" replied an exasperated Mike as he took out his compass, "We've got a map, a compass and I know

where we are! Of course we'll get through it in that time!"

Mike made sure that the car was locked properly and decided to leave the head and rear lights on to cut the chance of another vehicle crashing into it, which given the present volume of traffic seemed a very remote possibility. Even though it would be a heavy drain on the car battery that no longer mattered since the fact that the damn thing had broken down!

After double-checking the car quickly to make sure that they had left nothing behind Francesca and Mike headed off into the dense dark woods. As they strolled into the dense woodland Mike reflected on the emotional goodbyes that he had said to his parents , his mother had been crying profusely as if he was going on a long trip never to be seen again rather than just staying a night in a suspected haunted house. He had tried to console her by telling her that he would be seeing her early next week, but no words that he spoke could dry her tears and she simply begged him not to go as she had a bad feeling about the whole thing.

The last scene that he pictured of them was his mother on the doorstep weeping with his dad's arm around her protectively as if that some how would ward of the sadness inflicting her. Even from the car he could see her tears of worry seeping down her cheeks , tears for her baby who was now a man, but who she would see as always being her baby. A dark thought clouded his bristling energy for the task in hand as a question which only time could answer haunted his mind .What did his mother's intuition know which he didn't?

They found the trail they had to follow easily and walked down it cheerfully while holding hands. Francesca couldn't help giggling saying that it reminded her of the Grimm Fairy Tale about Hansel and Gretel who go into the woods together and get lost. Mike was glad that she was able to see the funny side of it because he certainly didn't .It would be no fun getting lost here , not now , not ever.

Mike paused for a moment to check his bearings and took out his compass.
"Everything OK?" Francesca ventured tentatively her giggling had vanished and had now be replaced by worry caused by the mystified expression which was rapidly spreading over Mike's face.
"Yeah everything's OK darling!" his voice sounded unsure.
"Everything except for this compass!" his voice had a discernible tone of fear in it that unnerved Francesca , sparking off the same emotion within her.
"You do know where we are don't you?" demanded Francesca angrily.
"Of course I do!" Mike defended himself fiercely. "It just that the compass doesn't know where it is itself!" he added sheepishly.
"Take a look at it yourself tell me what you make of this!" He demanded as he thrust it under her nose.
Francesca stared at the compass in amazement her eyes hypnotised by the compass which raced round crazily as if in a race with itself. It reminded her of her Golden retriever Oscar that spent much of it time in the senseless activity of chasing his own tail.

They walked further along while poring over the small grey compass nestled in the palm of Mike's hand, expecting the compass needle to regain its sanity at any moment. If anything it just simply got madder and span round so fast that they expected it to fly off through the compass glass face!

Although the compass seemed to be going haywire Mike saw no need to panic. He knew where they were and the direction that they were going, he had simply wanted to consult the compass to verify their position rather than give their position! What worried Mike was the fact that the compass might have been defective from the start and pointed them off in the wrong direction. Just a few degrees out could send them on a route that would miss the house completely and send them deeper into this wilderness whose jaws threatened to close round them never letting them go. Mercifully Francesca seemed not to be sharing his fears and was continuing to stare transfixed at the compass needle.

"Amazing! Amazing!" she repeated over and over again to herself in wondrous fascination. She seemed oblivious now to the biting cold , the invading darkness , the dwindling path. It even seemed that he himself was becoming invisible to her. She was acting as if she was looking at a compass suspended in mid-air rather than a compass being held by him in his hand.

"Francesca?" Mike addressed her firmly but quietly. Her silence was her reply, Mike looked into those eyes of her's and saw the reflection from the compass glinting in her face. He wasn't even sure if she had heard him.

"Francesca !" Mike repeated loudly while wrenching the compass from her sight.

Francesca looked up startled as if she had just been woken up from a deep sleep.
"Uhhh!" she murmured.
"You OK?" Mike could see that a strange glaze had come over her eyes and she didn't seem to be quite herself as if there was something missing from her personality.

Mike snapped his fingers sharply twice right in front of her face. Francesca perked up brightly and seemed to regain her old self but then she immediately gripped her forehead and grimaced in pain.
"What happened ?" she asked tiredness slurring her words.
"I'm not sure. You seemed to be in some sort of hypnotic trance!" Mike guessed vaguely.
Although relieved that Francesca seemed to be more or less back to her normal self, he wondered how it could have happened in the first place. It didn't seem possible that she could have been so easily and readily put in such a deep and sudden trance by just a spinning compass needle! Though on reflection Mike surmised nothing should really surprise on a night like this given their task and the circumstances surrounding it .
He carefully placed his hand on her forehead to see if she was suffering from a high temperature or from some form of fever, he. It felt unusually warm but not so warm as to overtly cause Mike concern.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked her again gently squeezing

her hand while looking at her intently.
"I'm just fine -honestly!" she reiterated the same familiar firmness that Mike knew now back in place within her tone!
"I don't know what came over me!" she added in a less sure almost scared voice.
"Don't you remember anything?" asked Mike.
"No absolutely nothing!" she replied shaking her head sadly.

Her answer didn't really surprise Mike it was not uncommon in fact it was the norm for people not to remember what they did , thought or said while in a trance. He considered the possibility of hypnotising Francesca himself to see if her subconscious mind could shed some light on her short ordeal. He knew though that all that would have to wait for later, right now they had the more urgent task of getting to Winthorpe Manor without any further delays.

They pressed on hastily their footsteps making their mark in the soft mushy leaves. It was as if they were the only living things in that wood. or if they weren't then they were the only living things that were actually moving . Their quickening footsteps in the slimy decaying vegetation being the only things that broke the wood's cold empty silence.

Mike looked up and to his shock and surprise saw that the overhanging branches from the numerous trees had over the years entwined with each other to knit a thick blanket of wood which had effectively blotted out the sky and replaced it with tree branches at every angle, stretching over like powerful arms ready to protect the dwellers that resided under them or ready to swoop

down to embrace them and never let go!

Francesca also stared up, a form of reverence in her gaze as if it was a once in a life time privilege for her to behold the sight above her now. She stopped to stare upwards "Isn't it beautiful Mike?"
" Yeah sure Fran we'll take some pictures next time! Let's just keep moving OK!" he pleaded as he tugged at her hand.
"We've got cameras why don't we take some now?" she begged dreamily as if she had been transported to another world.
Mike couldn't believe what he was hearing , she hadn't even wanted to come into the woods in the first place, now that she was here she wanted to stay and take pictures!

Keeping his temper in check Mike reply was a patient one "Let's not stop baby we have to get to the house before it gets much darker . Remember our new car is standing idle by the road, the longer we leave it the more chance there is of it being damaged or towed away by some enterprising thief!"

Francesca threw back her head and laughed raucously. "OK! OK! " she agreed. "We'll get some photos for the album on our way back!"

Mike smiled, pleased but at the same time surprised that she should think that they would be coming back through these woods -as far as he was concerned going through them once was enough and that was because they were a short cut to Winthorpe Manor. He was also surprised at Franseca's raucous laughter, he didn't think that his half joke about their car being towed away by a car

thief was that funny! Usually it took a lot more than that to make her smile never mind laugh and she had never laughed in such a wild manner like that before! All that didn't matter now though, all that mattered was that they were moving again towards their destination

Mike stooped to retie his shoelaces that had come loose during their brisk trudging through the forest., Francesca stopped next to him chiding him gently for not tying them tightly in the first place.

It was then that he heard the trudging .

At first he thought that it was Francesca going on without him he looked up to call to her to tell her to wait for him, but instead saw her standing next to him smiling at him strangely. Mike immediately stood up instantly dismayed. Maybe it had been in his imagination , maybe it was just the wind pushing the dead leaves into flight upwards and upwards till it would relinquish it hold allowing them to float gently to the ground- but the air was cool and still! Mike froze and listened hard, yes he could hear the sound of someone walking briskly through the forest and although it was a small sound that seemed quite distant it was undeniably quite recognisable as the sound of someone (or something) in the woods with them!

"What's the matter babe-" enquired Francesca perplexed.
"Shhh!" Mike interrupted her. "Can't you hear it?" His ears strained to hear the trudging again so that he might be able to judge how far away it was . He was surprised at himself for not

calling out to whoever that person might be, after all he or she might be able to help them. but something in Mike's throat made his shout stick and it refused to rise out into the night air. He couldn't explain why he was so reluctant to attract this stranger's attention except that he had a deep foreboding feeling about it, all fuelled by the belief that anyone else walking about in the woods at that time of night must be up to no good. Unfortunately Francesca didn't share his reluctance.

"WE'RE OVER HERE!"- she bellowed out .
"NO!" cried out Mike as he rushed to her and put his hand over her mouth to stop her from giving away their location to whoever was following them.
Enraged Francesca pushed away Mike's hand "Are you mad? What the hell are yer doing? " she demanded in a voice bristling with anger as they fell to the leafy floor in an untidy dishevelled heap.
" I was gonna ask you the same thing" Mike angrily replied. "We don't know who else is out here with us, it could be a madman!"
"There's only one madman out here and I'm looking at him right now!" she spat out to him while casting a cold unblinkingly stare directly into his eyes.
"Look I'm sorry if I hurt you !" he apologised "but I'm not sorry for trying to stop you from telling a complete stranger who we know nothing about where we are !" he concluded defiantly while getting up. He offered his hand to Francesca who looked at it for a moment then took it hesitantly. Mike strong hands immediately pulled her to her feet and close to himself.
"I'm sorry too!" she admitted "I was a fool! I didn't know what came over me!" she confessed humbly.

"Don't worry about it Fran! Let's just worry about getting to the house OK?" Mike's reply might have seen casual enough but he didn't have to look deep in his heart to see the worry there. Francesca's increasingly erratic behaviour was constantly causing him greater and greater concern. The way she was acting seemed so out of character and even more unpredictable than usual. The only good news at the moment was that he could no longer hear that distant incessant trudging.

Mike moved closer to Francesca squeezing her hand tighter " Are you sure you're alright Fran?" he asked gently.
Francesca's head swivelled round like a robot with her jaws snapping like a ferocious wolf.
"WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THAT I'M NOT ALRIGHT!"
Mike almost sprung back in shock at this unprovoked verbal attack, having in his mind done nothing to have deserved it.
"What's the hell's the matter with you? Tell me!" he ordered as he pulled her round so that they faced each other.
"I don't know ! I just don't know !"she cried out in despair." I get these headaches ..I forget.." her words trailed off into the cold night air, leaving Mike no answers and holding a girl who seemed on the verge of crumpling in his arms like paper.

Then the trudging started again.

This time it was near, much nearer. Mike looked around frantically, it seemed to be coming from all directions simultaneously as if he was in the middle of some elaborate and gigantic quadraphonic sound system-but with no visible

loudspeakers.
He realised whoever was out there already knew they were there and most probably knew where they were as well. It made no sense to maintain their silence in the hope of remaining invisible from this approaching threat.
"WHOSE THERE?" Mike called out not expecting or hoping for a reply. He wasn't disappointed, whoever was following them didn't want to get into a conversation.
"Come on Fran! We've gotta move!" he said pulling her upright.

Mike looked about wildly for the best route to pursue that would take them to Winthorpe Manor and away from the trudging noise that was getting ominously closer to both of them.

Struggling in the darkness they edged their way through the woods creeping from tree to tree looking about with bated breath before moving off again. Mike could sense Francesca's fear of what lay behind them and uncertainty of what lay before them.

"Where the hell is that noise coming from?" a panicky Francesca asked desperately searching Mike's face for some answer , some expression that would tell her whether or not he believed the answer that he was going to give her, but his face was a blank and neither proved or disproved his exasperated reply "I don't know Fran ! I just don't know!"

Mike estimated that they were now more than half-way to the house. Their fast pace meant that they would reach there sooner than he had originally estimated, which was just as well because the noise seemed to be getting louder but instead of behind them

it was now in front of them! He had a simple choice, either double-back and take a different way which would cost them dearly time-wise or press on forward straight into whatever or whoever stood between them and the house!

It was Francesca who tried to make the decision for him by dragging him back the way that they had just come over the mud splattered foliage, snapped twigs and large branches shed by tired trees no longer able to stand up to the elements of wind and rain.
"We've got to get away!" she pleaded with him "This way! We have to go this way! There's someone in front of us!" Mike could clearly see the storm of panic in her eyes that she was trying to fight back as well as the tears that would inevitably follow it.
"NO!" commanded Mike sternly as he tried to take control of the situation that was rapidly fleeing out of control and spiralling towards disaster.
"We've got to keep calm and think! If we panic then we're lost! Do you understand? Lost!" he raged.
What do we do then? What do we do?" she asked incessantly. Hoping for the one answer from her boyfriend that would make everything alright. But that answer was not forthcoming. instead the only thing that she got was a sharp tug as Mike pulled her by her wrist back towards the sinister trudging.

"We can't go there we can't !" Francesca panicked unashamedly as Mike's strength overpowered her and forced her to go where she didn't want to. It all brought back ancient childhood terrors for Francesca, when as a schoolchild her so called friends had dragged her into a cleaning equipment cupboard against her will. She had fought hard but no matter how hard she had fought, the

puny strength of a 7 year old had had been no match for the combined might of five other 7 year olds who had each laughed sadistically in anticipation of the pain that they were going to cause. They had shoved her in there cruelly and had then propped a broom against the closet door to keep her locked in her prison. It had been dark in there with no light and no fresh air as she found out 10 minutes later when the air became stuffy through her breathing in her own stale air. She hammered away in vain but her tormentors had already gone home to pretend to be the little angels there parents thought they were. Any regret that they might have felt for their cruel actions had been replaced by the excited feeling of looking forward to the weekend and two days away from boring teachers in a boring school.

In the end the heat, stuffiness and weakness had taken their toll on her sending her reeling into unconsciousness. By a freak chance she was discovered by the school caretaker but was too embarrassed to tell the truth. instead she had lied and made some far-fetched excuse to how she had become trapped in there. She had made it sound like a dare that had gone wrong . Red-faced and not having the courage to look at the caretaker's scornful face.

After getting home she had lied further saying that she had been kept back after school for bad behaviour which earned her a slap from her father during one of his rare appearances when sober and an angry word from her mother, which had hurt more than her father's slap especially as she had been innocent. Back at school on Monday everyone acted normally as if nothing had happened , nothing was said to her and nothing more done to her, everyone had forgotten, everyone except her.

"Trust me Fran ! Just trust me !"Mike pleaded with her as he brushed away the cobwebs of her childhood memories, and pulled her forcibly towards the mysterious noise. This was much, much more terrifying for Francesca than the cleaning cupboard episode, anything that she had imagined in there had just been a figment of her imagination that could be dispelled by the cupboard door being opened and her walking home. Right now there was no home to go to , no cupboard door to open ,there was no escape.

The trudging was now getting even louder by the second as if it was being made by a giant rather than a normal-sized person. "Mike! NO!" she protested but her words fell on deaf ears. Mike was trapped in his own train of thought , he had just two objectives in his mind to get them past this stranger and to the house no matter what.

They were almost at the source of the noise now and were on the verge of hitting it head on. Mike tried to laugh at his own fears about the noise, chances being all this was just something that was being blown out of all proportion. They would meet the person who was most probably lost like they were or who was perhaps out for a late night stroll , perhaps the person was walking a dog and was deaf which would explain why there had been no reply to their shouts. They would shake his or her hand maybe invite them back to the house for tea! -But it was no good trying to fool himself with such whimsical thoughts Mike sighed despairingly to himself. There was something straight ahead of them with only some trees hiding it, it was large , it was sinister, it was evil! and

they were going to run right into it! It was too late for regrets though he felt like having them , it was too late to admit he might be wrong to have made this choice. It was too late for anything except to go on as fast as they could towards their unknown fate.

Francesca gripped Mike's hand even tighter and he glanced over to her to see that her eyes had become as round as saucers as she attempted to focus on what lay ahead. It was then that they saw someone ! Or perhaps something unknown would have been a better description , it had no definite shape or form , the nearest thing that it could be compared to was a cloud of mist, but this mist was black and had a will of its own! The strange way it hugged the ground then glided upwards then down again suggested some sort of intelligence. Although its shape seemed dictated by the air currents surrounding it Mike was in no doubt that if it chose to dictate its outward appearance and direction then it could.

Mike looked at Francesca to say something and was totally taken aback by the expression on her face- it was as if she was admiring this strange mist! Her eyes followed its path unflinchingly as the black mist flew on the light night breeze on a path- a path directly towards them! Francesca was now standing transfixed just like she had when she had looked at the spinning compass needle!

"FRANSESCA!" Mike cried out frantically while shaking her vigorously in an attempt to wake her from her hypnotic trance , but she refused to budge or look at him . She just stood there rooted to the spot as if she had suddenly grown deep roots there which were anchoring her down.

"Francesca please wake up !" he repeated desperate for a response -any response other than this zombie-like expression on her face. He tried clicking his fingers but that was no good, he even considered slapping her on the face to pull her mind back up into consciousness, but he had never hit Francesca, as a matter of fact he had never struck any woman and he wasn't going to start now, in any case such a sudden brutal awakening could cause her irreparable psychological damage!

He knew that if they were to survive this dire situation he had to think quickly and act even quicker, but time was running out as the monstrous black mist monster floated ever closer to them, its tranquil gentle movement belying the fact that it had something nasty in store for both of them!

It was now 50 yards away and closing as it lazily snaked round the tree trunks sometimes coming to a wide tree trunk and dividing in two then reuniting again after curving round the trunk , other times it would just remain intact and pass right next to the rough tree bark, filling every crevice and pore temporarily as it brushed by.

It was 40 now yards away.

It was gathering speed as it got closer and seemed to hungrily sense their presence, even though it had no visible eyes or ears! Maybe it didn't need them! Maybe it could sense the negative vibes that they were emitting! Maybe it could even read their thoughts!

It was now 30 yards away.

Mike decided to try an 'experiment', though he knew that experiment was a very poor choice of word for him to use to describe it as their lives and souls might depend on the result of it! He was gambling on the notion that the mist couldn't see them, perhaps if they moved position it might pass by without scathing them. He shifted his position away from where Francesca stood and started shouting loudly, waving his hands like a madman anything to attract its attention but nothing happened -at first, then slowly ever so slowly its direction changed very slightly at first, till finally there was a discernible shift in its direction as its path changed and it started to unmistakably pick a path in Mike's direction!

Mike was filled with relief and terror simultaneously, relief knowing that the black mist could be led away, but also terror knowing that this was indeed some sort of a monster that was undeniably after them. Its reaction to his shouting having eliminated the last remnant of doubt in his mind that this might just be a harmless piece of smog floating in the air!

It was now only 20 yards away.

His plan was a simple one lead the mist away from Francesca, then run back quickly to her before it was able to change direction and follow him . By the look of it Mike judged that it seemed quite slow-moving (at the moment!). He would easily be able to outrun it and get to the house with Francesca , he would get her there no matter what even if he had to carry her all the way!

It was now nearly upon them!

Suddenly disaster struck his plans down. In the same moment that he had been given hope it was mercilessly stolen away when to Mike's utter dismay the mist divided in TWO, one transparent tentacle reaching out to Francesca the other one probing its way steadily to Mike making it look like an grotesque and obscenely large 2 headed black slug!

Immediately Mike realised that there was only one thing to do- RUN!

Skilfully ducking beneath the mist as one of its tentacles attempted to brush across him and keeping down low, he launched a flying rugby tackle aimed at Francesca's ankles which brought her down to the ground. Thankfully the leaves acted like a mattress and softened her fall just as the tentacle aimed at her tried to engulf her in its black misty flesh.

Francesca's face snapped wide awake and she started to look about disorientated.
"What -" she began.
"Don't ask any questions Fran just RUN!" implored Mike as he tried to pull her away from the approaching tentacle now drifting downwards towards them.
Franseca screamed as she saw the evil for the horror that it was and scrambling to her feet allowed herself to be pulled by Mike as they fled deeper back into the woods away from that terror but also away from the safe-haven of Winthorpe Manor- if indeed a

supposedly haunted house could be called a safe-haven!

They ran and they kept on running, not waiting for that thing to catch up with them not waiting to talk , not waiting to breath. They ran until their bodies refused to take them any further and they collapsed in a tangled heap. They both sat there for a minute just trying to catch their breath, both of them too tired too be terrified or exclaim to each other in words of panic. Instead all they did was simply stare at each other their eyes doing all the talking that was necessary.

After staring at each other in speechless disbelief over what had occurred, it was Mike who spoke first.

"We have to go back!" he managed to gasp out between snatching breaths.
Francesca merely stared back the look of twisted shock on her face told Mike loudly what she thought of his planned route.

"I know it sounds crazy Fran, but it'll be even crazier to stay put where we are! The house is our only hope!" he continued, desperate to make her see the sense and logic in his words.
"What about the car?" she argued weakly knowing that that was even more reason for them to continue towards the house.
"What about it Fran? The car's dead and if we stay there we could end up dead as well!"
"What about that thing? It could attack us there!" she protested
That thing could attack us here as well as there. It could attack us anywhere!" his voice determined and resolute in what he

proposed.
"Mike please we can't , we mustn't..." Francesca's voice meandered off as she frantically tried to clutch at straws , at any reason for them not to descend into the black bowels of the woods.
"We must! We have no choice!" He gently gripped both her arms and pulled her closely to himself . He felt her warm body close to himself and flames of desire pulsed through him as he helplessly moved forward to kiss her.

Francesca looked hypnotised into Mike's dark eyes . She felt strong and reassured as they held each other, when she looked into those eyes she felt that anything was possible , she felt his strength and confidence . She believed without hesitation when he told her "Everything's gonna be fine!"

She felt overcome with the desire to please him, to serve him in any way possible, Francesca marvelled at these wonderful emotions striking her heart like a thousand arrows. She could feel herself slipping into the abyss of human desire. She couldn't help herself, she didn't want to help herself. A part of her begged for the strange erotic feelings in her to grow stronger while a part , a part of her mind that represented logic and common-sense seemed to be getting weaker and smaller all the time as it feebly tried to resist the stronger overpowering sexual instinct that Francesca felt obliged to obey.

Knowing in the small part of her mind that still consciously obeyed logic that they had no time for this kind of closeness in this situation, she still couldn't stop her hand moving carefully and

very slowly moving towards Mikes right hand that rested lightly on one of her arms. Deliberately and knowing the kind of response that it would bring she took the giant-like hand and placed it on her own throbbing firm breast pressing it down gradually so that he might feel its throbbing desire.
"I'm scared stiff of what's in those woods! I'm not very brave am I?" she asked timidly.
"It doesn't matter how scared you are, I'll be brave for the both of us!" Mike whispered as they kissed passionately while holding each other so very tenderly as if afraid that the other was made of porcelain which might break if the other squeezed too hard.

Soon they were both so submerged in their feelings of passion that they failed to notice the black mist drifting effortlessly over to where they laid entwined together, lost in their feelings to each other and blind to the danger that lurked close to them. Mike's hands were now greedily exploring Francesca's lithe body while her gentle smooth skin flowed like milk under his fingertips as he hungrily explored her flesh.

The explosion of emotion between them had come as a complete surprise to both of them, not the intensity of the emotion and the passionate kisses and embraces but the time and place where they had suddenly decided to indulge their feelings for each other. It was Mike who noticed it first, the feeling of danger being close. With great emotional effort as if he was fighting some strange controlling force he raised his awareness from the seductive advances of Francesca just long enough to glance over his shoulder. It was long enough.

Mike saw the misty snaking monster coming straight for them hungrily impatient and ready to devour them both.
"FRAN! GET UP AND RUN!" He shouted to her while staring at the nameless thing but Francesca's enticing fingers still remained hooked round his neck. Her staring were eyes transfixed on him while her grip on his neck grew stronger and more forceful as if she was trying to keep him there so that they could continue their love-play.

"Please hold me! Touch me! Don't stop don't stop please don't stop!" she begged him. For the briefest of moments Mike felt his will power crumble and his legs sag as he fell towards her intent on receiving more pleasure from her sweet red lips. But his eyes refused to let him forget that death was moments away and in an instant his will power was rebuilt into an impregnable wall with only one aim -too keep out death and to ensure survival.
"What are you saying Fran? We've gotta go! Now!" he pleaded, as Francesca's long nails dug into his back like talons, making him grimace in pain.
"Fran what the hell are yer doing? Look its just behind us!" Mike swung round and forced Francesca to see the sight that he had just seen.
"LOOK FRAN LOOK DAMN IT" he bellowed at her.

Francesca gazed at the black mist but the expression on her face remained unchanged as if she had been looking at a perfectly normal sight.

"What's the matter darling? I don't see anything except trees!" murmured Francesca thickly in a seductive manner, some how

the way she spoke those words reminded Mike of a puppet with strings being controlled by some puppetmaster. Mike looked deep into Francesca's face and saw a look that he had hoped would never return. Someone or something was controlling her again, if they didn't manage to escape then they would both perish in some mysterious yet unavoidably terrible manner. Mike didn't know for sure if this black mist meant to kill them but it was safe to say that its intentions weren't friendly. Besides he had no intention of throwing Francesca and himself at its mercy!

He looked down to see Francesca unbuttoning his shirt and loosening his belt, to any spectator the situation would have seemed almost comical bordering on the absurd, if this unknown monster had a mouth and a sense of humour it no doubt would have been chuckling nastily away at the ease of catching its prey .

Using the last of his will power he pulled her up and yelled in her face "WAKE UP FRAN! as usual she ignored his yelling. "Come on baby ! Let's strip!" she implored him pulling him further into her clutches.

Mike estimated that the black mist was now just about 10 yards away and gaining speed all the time as if it had the scent of their blood in its imaginary nostrils. Mike turned round and his fears were confirmed!

In the split second that Mike turned away Francesca used his distraction to her full advantage, undeterred she wrapped her thin arms round him determined never to let him go! He turned round to come face to face with her obsessed expression and felt her

pelvic thrusts in his loins rekindling again the feelings of passion and longing to see her naked. Francesca gave one mighty heave and they both went toppling over like a tower. Mike tried to roll off her in mid -air but he was unable to undo her vice-like grip in time .

Both of them went crashing down to the rough ground below, Francesca hit her head first and hardest on a large fallen branch then Mike fell on her winding her and compounding her semi-consciousness into near unconsciousness. While pulling her roughly to her feet he felt something scorching hot on the back of his leg as if some one had branded it with an electric bar , he looked behind to see the black mist just inches away from his leg. Mike could feel the his flesh start to sizzle not from the surface of his skin but actually from deep inside his leg. Acting on reflex Mike moved his leg away instantly from the swirling black mist that wanted to give him a deadly embrace but even this did not stop the pain that continued to radiate from his bone marrow and rose upwards towards his skin.

Forcing the pain to the back of his mind in the hope that it would be forgotten Mike struggled forward with the faint realisation that his leg was being MIRCOWAVED! He vaguely remembered from a school physics lesson how these heat waves worked. They cooked things from the middle quickly working their way to the outside surface. He also vaguely remembered that even if an item was removed from the microwave, the item in question (namely his leg in this case) would still continue to be 'cooked' which was why even at this moment he could still feel his leg getting hotter and hotter till it felt that his arteries and veins were going to burst

with the heat!

Mike felt on the verge of his pain threshold which if he had reached would have caused him to drop Francesca and fall to the ground leaving themselves to be cooked alive from the inside out! If he could just hold on to his mobility for few more seconds and just keep going then they might be alright but his progress was slow and getting slower due to the pain in his leg getting worse and due to the fact that Francesca was now dangerously unconscious, her slim legs dragging uselessly along the ground as Mike attempted to save them both.

The situation could not have been more dire even if he had wished it so, he didn't feel brave enough to risk a check on how close the burning fog was behind him, all he knew was that if he had dared turned around all that it would have done would have cost him moments, moments that could decide whether or not they lived or died.

Suddenly he tripped and fell sending them both crashing to the bracken strewn woodland floor! Cursing himself for his clumsiness and weakness, he pulled Francesca and himself upright. The monster must be snapping at his heels by now Mike surmised and he knew it was just a matter of time before it smothered them forever in searing heat and turned them into a pile of ashes!

Then he saw the house!

He at first thought that it must have been some dark mirage put

out by his mind or worse still by the woods themselves to give him false hope, but as they neared this black outlined silhouette with every painful step he realised how real it was. Every step that brought him forward revealed new details of its dilapidated structure. Firstly he saw the old decaying brickwork, then the shuttered windows finally he could make out what looked like a door. Though it all seemed miles away Mike's pain suddenly vanished and even a spring in his step came back maybe it was the effect of the deadly microwaves wearing off , or maybe it was because he had been thrown a lifeline by coming across this house, most probably it was a combination of both.

He wondered what house they had stumbled upon, really though he didn't care. All he cared was that it was real and could protect them from the pursuing flesh burning storm. Mike didn't have to wonder about the identity of this house for long though when his proximity to the house revealed the answer. Etched on a piece of woodworm- ridden piece of wood hammered into the doorway were the unmistakable words 'WINTHORPE HOUSE'. Mike almost paused to rest and sigh with relief and would have if not for the fog that was literally hot on his heels! They had stumbled on the house that they were supposed to investigate-though in their present condition they were in no state to investigate anything!

He now knew that when the fog had come across them a second time somehow during their disorientation and confusion while fleeing it they had stumbled onto the right path towards the house.

Mike felt like jumping for joy and would have if poor Francesca

had been fully conscious and more importantly in control of all her faculties which obviously she wasn't! Twice now some malevolent force had controlled her forcing her to do its bidding, each time she had almost doomed them both by her actions. They had to get in that house use the phone and get help!

All hopes of an easy entry into the house that looked deserted and long abandoned were dashed when he saw the barricaded door. After frantically climbing the noisy creaky steps leading to the house's front door he dared to turn round and face the approaching fog. It was gone! Mike looked around mystified, the sound of his heartbeat throbbing all the way into his mouth as he glanced nervously expecting it to return as quickly as it had gone.

Carefully he laid Francesca down very gently and turned his attention to the tall ancient looking door standing between them and salvation. Mike called out and hammered frantically twice with his fists on the decaying boards, but knew that he was fooling himself if he was expecting somebody to let him in. The door had been barricaded from the outside and the house looked devoid of any human presence. A shiver went down and back up his spine as he realised that if the house did contain someone they would scarcely likely to be human, in fact it would be quite likely that they were going to be quite the opposite!

He heaved a deep sigh of relief when his calling and hammering went unheeded and was only answered by the deathly silence of this tomb-like house. He carefully surveyed the rusting nails that held the boards in and saw that they should be easy to remove. Getting a firm grip on one of the least stable and shaky boards

Mike pulled with all his strength but nothing moved. The boards were obviously more resilient than they looked!

Undeterred he tried again this time he was paid for his effort with sharp needle like splinters piercing his fingers. Cursing fervently he sucked instinctively at the cuts in an attempt to quell the pain . He tasted with disgust the foul fungi covered wood and rust in his mouth and spat it out into a handkerchief which stained it black- he even thought he could see some insect crawling in his spit! Revolted, Mike immediately disposed off the handkerchief.

He was sure that the first aid kit was in Francesca's back pack , he would search for it later , The pain from these small wounds inflicted by the house grew in intensity each time he concentrated on them and even more when he looked at them! Mike couldn't help contemplating on the unpleasant fear that there could be the chance of a nasty infection possibly even tetanus if he wasn't careful, he would have to give the cuts immediate medical attention as soon as they got through the door.

Taking out his last handkerchief he wrapped it round the 4 cut fingers and bound it round them tightly to form some kind of makeshift bandage. Mike took a deep breath to gather his breath and determination and turned back to the job in hand. As he turned he caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye or at least he thought he did! Looking up startled at the mysterious person or thing he had spied he saw a window that wasn't shuttered but was instead open though the room inside was obscured in shadows. Mike strained his eyes till they ached but it was too dark to see beyond that window as if a veil of

darkness had been draped across it.

Surely it had been just a trick brought on by a tired and now quite paranoid mind, it suddenly struck him that he had checked the front windows and they had been all fully shuttered-up, perhaps he had missed this one in the rush and confusion to escape the black smog. Mike contented himself with this explanation but deep in his heart if he was honest with himself he knew that he had checked all the windows at the front and that they HAD all been shut!

Mike racked his brain to see if there was any tool he could use that would lever the boards free, there was the torch but although it was perhaps long enough to do the job it certainly wasn't strong enough due to the fact that it was made of plastic!

He scoured the vicinity for any thing like a crowbar or another piece of metal that could break away the boards. His search proved fruitless and he slid down to the floor despondently next to Francesca. He leant over and gazed at her peacefully still face -too peaceful and too still! Mike put his head close to her chest dreading the worst after a moment he pulled his a head away a look of relief on his face. She was just unconscious her heartbeat had proved that, a moment later she let out a small moan.

"Fran? Fran? Can you hear me?" Mike whispered softly as he hoped against hope for some small sigh of recognition but none came as she drifted back into unconsciousness. Just at that moment Mike saw something dark like a part of cloak move out of the corner of his eye, he stared back up at the unshuttered

window and could have sworn that someone had been watching him even though he could see no one by the window! He was sure someone or something was still poring over them, assessing them surveying every move they made. Deep in the dark recesses of that room Mike could sense that something was in there stirring, waiting and watching.

He once more examined the stiff wooden cracked boards and reached up again to rip away at them with his bare hands. He needn't have bothered. His hands were barely 10 inches away from the board that he had targeted when all of a sudden he noticed that they were starting to vibrant slightly! He put the palm of his hands on them to make sure that it wasn't all in his imagination. It wasn't! His hands sprang away in shock as if he had put them in hot coals. Prudently Mike started to slowly back away one step at a time, a slow walk which turned into a hasty retreat as the vibration turned into a definite shaking and the shaking into a violent banging as the boards struggled to work themselves free as if there was something inside trying to get out.

He threw himself and Fransesca over to one side just in time , less than a split second later the boards exploded outwards catapulting shards of wood through the air like deadly javelins and firing out the rusty nails as if they were bullets. Mike was under no doubt that if he had been in the middle of that deadly shower those projectiles would have sunk, into him like an axe in thin air cutting him in two! A few seconds later he heard the last pieces of woods land a little distance away falling harmlessly down like a hurricane that had blown itself out.

When the 'rain' had died down Mike was still holding Francesca tightly closely to his chest her head covered by his jacket which he had vainly hoped would afford her some protection had the deadly onslaught turned in their direction.

He sat there stunned and still disbelieving what he had just seen, even though his eyes had not lied to him though he wished that they had! After resting Francesca gently back on the ground and using her backpack as a makeshift pillow for her head he made his way back to the door which now stood gaping wide open like a grotesque pock-marked wooden toothless jaw.

He hesitantly took a step closer to the edge of the doorway so that he might visually be able to penetrate the darkness that shrouded the house's secrets from him. Although he was at the door entrance he still couldn't make out even the most basic features of the interior. After taking a quick look round to check on Francesca who was still unconscious , he boldly took one step forward to the very edge of the doorway.

Slowly his eyes started to focus and make use of the little light that there was. He could see what looked like a giant staircase judging by its ghostly outline which was just visible through the darkness that had closed around him. At that moment out of nowhere Mike felt a slight breeze but it was a breeze that chilled him to the bone! He knew that he had to try and find its source but first he had to get Fransesca into the relative safety of the house.

He found Francesca exactly the way that he had left her. Her safety had to be his first priority and however strange the house

might seem he believed that they would still be safer in there than out here, especially with the fog still lurking about anywhere and everywhere ready to strike at anytime! At least inside they would hopefully be able to seal themselves in giving them valuable extra time till help got to them should it attack.

He sat Francesca upright and while supporting her his hand slid into her backpack and searched blindly for what it would recognise by touch. When his hands alighted on the small oblong box he knew straight away that he had found he was looking for- the first aid kit! After carefully fishing it out he quickly opened it and took out some smelling salts which he waved under her nose. The results were almost instantaneous and her eyes jumped wide open and alert though her voice sounded slow and groggy.

"What happened ?" she whimpered frailly.
"A hell of a lot !" replied Mike truthfully.
"Look!" he exclaimed pointing excitedly at the dark structure looming up in front of them. "We're here! This is the house Fran! We found it!"
"H-H-How ?" stammered Francesca as she started to weakly get to her feet, her face full of awe at what she saw before her. She started to shake as her feet began give way from under her but Mike immediately gripped her round her waist to steady her and allowed her head to rest on his shoulder.
"Take it easy Fran you're still suffering from concussion!" he urged.
"What happened? I can't remember!" she asked bewildered.
"I'll tell you about it later!" he promised. " First things first! Let's get you inside the house! How's your head?" he enquired his

forehead etched with worry-lines.
"I'll survive!" She grimaced stoically "A couple of aspirin will do me fine." she added with a smile.

After gathering up all their gear they made their way cautiously towards the front door. Mike's torch picked up details not previously noticed - a hole there, a crack there. Every detail helping them to map their surroundings. They felt glad to be at their destination even though they had arrived at it under terrible circumstances!

Staying closely huddled together and holding hands they moved with care towards the open door.
After painstakingly making their way to the mouth of the house they finally both stood at what they had feared could be the entrance to hell itself, not necessarily the biblical hell but another hell self-contained in itself, ensnaring souls and trapping them in limbo forever. Freezing them between heaven and earth , between life and death , perhaps that was the worse type of hell not knowing exactly where and what you are, not knowing exactly where you're going. For a while they said nothing as if out of fearful reverence for the bloody history of the house.

Mike was the first one to speak. Turning to Francesca he spoke to her in a hushed whisper as if he was afraid that the dead might hear.
"Are you ready Fran?" he solemnly asked her.
"As ready as I'll ever be!" she replied , her voice sounding drained of confidence and hope.
"Don't worry we'll get through this its only gonna one night at the

most anyway ! Maybe even less if the emergency services get here sooner !" he remarked optimistically.
Francesca couldn't help but smile back and run her fingers through his hair, he always seemed to be optimistic , always trying to look on the bright side of life instead of the strife which life brings. It was one of his many endearing qualities which she loved. Mike returned the loving gesture by taking her hand and kissing it gently. "If you're ready then let's go!" he continued as he took her hand and held it extra tightly.

As soon as they passed through the doors it was as if they were passing into another world, a much colder more frozen world, although there was no ice anywhere Mike imagined that it was colder than the Antarctic!

As soon as they entered he felt Francesca's hand shake violently as her whole body shook with cold.
"Its colder than hell Mike! " she forced out through her chattering teeth.
"This could well be hell "retorted Mike while therapeutically rubbing Francesca's freezing hand in an attempt to get some warmth back into it.
"How does that feel Fran?" he asked hopefully.
"Better thanks, much better "she replied gratefully.
Mike nodded smiling to acknowledge her thanks, and they both continued on their way deep into the maze of corridors and doors. Mike spied a light switch, tried it but nothing happened and darkness continued to reign supreme in the house.

"The house should still be wired up to a mains electric supply, the

main fuse box should be in the basement, if we can just find it then maybe we can shed some light in this dark hole of a place!" he commented undeterred.
Making their way through the cobwebs that had accumulated through the years they gradually picked their way towards the basement using a layout map of the house that Francesca had uncovered during her research. Mike's powerful electric torches acted as their eyes and illuminated the once polished drab dusty grey stone floors and the once whitewashed walls that were now caked in dirt.
"Guess the caretaker wasn't too hot on spring cleaning " he observed as he fought his way through some cobwebs which had dead spiders enmeshed in them, who had most probably starved to death in this lifeless house.
"Looks too me as if the caretaker didn't do any caretaking at all!" criticised Francesca. Being tidy and clean were very important to her , what she saw here made her stomach want to convulse.
"I don't understand it I spoke to the caretaker! I rang him here!" Mike replied sounding more perplexed by the second with each filth covered wall and door they passed .
"Are you sure?" asked Francesca a tone of doubt growing ever apparent in her voice.
"I rang him here I tell you! I'm sure!" Mike's voice sounded firm but also slightly annoyed that Francesca would question his competence over such a matter.
" But are you sure it was really him? How did you know it wasn't someone else other than the caretaker?" Francesca interrogated him further mercilessly.
" Because I looked up the phone number for the house! I rang the number and I got through to the caretaker" Mike recounted

patiently trying to keep his temper in check.
"Or you got through to someone pretending to be a caretaker!" corrected Francesca.

Mike froze and pondered what Francesca had just said. It all made sense -terrible sense! How did he know that the person he had spoken to really had been the caretaker ? He could have been speaking to anyone or ANYTHING! He had only spoken to him once and although the conversation had been short he tried to remember the caretaker's voice. If his memory served him right then the voice had been deep and gravelly like that of a very old man a man who sounded perhaps too old to be taking on a huge place like this all by himself.

Something had seemed very wrong from the start!

"Mike? What's the matter?" a worried Francesca enquired, perturbed by her boyfriend's worried expression.

"Come on Fran let's get going! The sooner we get these lights on the better!" Mike replied ignoring her question knowing that it would be better not to confirm her doubts about the caretaker.

"After we've got the lights working we'll look for the telephone! I think that it might be upstairs!" Mike suggested hopefully.
"If there is a telephone !" Francesca replied scornfully . "Why would a run down slum like this have a working telephone anyway?"
"Because as I told you before.I rang here 2 weeks ago! That's why Fran!" Mike argued back, who was by now starting to feel

irritable and frustrated about being forced to repeat himself.
"You also said that you spoke to a caretaker. I don't see any sign of him or much evidence to show that any caretaking has gone on in this dirty dump either do you?" She carried on accusingly disregarding her partner's angry tone of voice.
"We haven't got time for this Fran , let's just find the main fuse box -" began Mike.
"And how do we know that there's a bloody thing like that in here we'll be lucky if there's even running water!" she nagged.
Something snapped in Mike- he had taken all that he was going to take from Fran! He wasn't going to take anymore of this verbal abuse especially as she was behaving as if it was all his fault!
"You got something to say about that?" Francesca provokingly challenged.

Mike opened his mouth and stopped himself from falling into the trap that she seemed to be setting for him. He knew at once that this was not the Francesca that he knew and loved, something strange was making her act this way! But what could be making her behave in such a fashion way? Could it possibly be the same force or thing that had controlled her out in the woods! Whatever it was, it might be trying to break them apart by causing tension between them therefore making them less effective as a team and instead make them weaker by causing them to be working against each other!

"We've got no time for this !" Mike said quickly as he hurried along leaving Francesca glaring after him in the semi-darkness for a few moments. Eventually she moved after him reluctantly, still angry that he had not taken up the psychological gauntlet that she

had thrown down before him.

It was just as well that Mike didn't turn round even to glance at her through the gloom that separated them. If he had he might have seen a strange red haze emanating from Francesca's eyes for a second before vanishing again but Mike continued blissfully in his ignorance blind to the danger that he was in.

"Well Fran here we are!" Mike exclaimed triumphantly as his torchlight illuminated the decaying basement door his joy mixed with relief that at least something was going right.. He turned round with a satisfied look on his face wallowing in his triumph but found to his shock no one there to share that triumph!

"Fran?" his question bounced murkily off the ancient walls but no answer came back. Mike waited a moment expecting Fran to poke her face round the corner with perhaps a sullen sulking look across it. But no one came. He waited another minute. Still there was no sign of her! Surely she still wasn't upset at his brisk brush-off with regards to her provocation? Evidently she was!

"FRAN!" this time his voice gave full vent to his panic as all thoughts of getting the lights on disappeared to be replaced by a new imperative need. Find Fran and find her now! A million fears and nightmare scenarios cascaded into his head of what might have happened to her, then another deluge of terrible scenes surfaced in his consciousness as he thought of what might happen to himself not only at the hands of the house but also at the hands of his Franseca! If she had become a puppet of this house then she was an instrument that could be used for evil!

An instrument that could be used against him!

He turned away from the basement door and back-tracked along the corridor which he was sure she had followed him along just minutes earlier. Perhaps he had gone ahead so fast that he had lost her and his poor Fran was wandering the endless maze of corridors! But that was ridiculous! He would have had to have sprinted rather than walk for that to happen!

"FRAN WHERE THE HELL ARE YER?" he yelled at the top of his voice as he moved his torch about haphazardly. It was then by pure chance that he came across some sort of liquid on the granite floor, which he thought nothing of till he noticed what colour it was- alarmed he knelt down and put his fingers in it to reveal that it had a congealed gooey consistency which confirmed his worse fears! The liquid was red and sticky -it was BLOOD ! It could be Fran's blood! Mike's mind recoiled at such a thought and prayed that it wasn't true! But the fact remained that as far he knew they were the only ones in the house and this blood hadn't been here for long-it was fresh enough for it to have dripped from Francesca!

He continued to snake the torch beam along the floor full of anxiety and dread as to what he might find next.
All of a sudden the beam alighted on another droplet of blood and another it was a trail which he had no choice except to follow. The droplets meandered lazily from side to side. Some even having splashed on the wall leaving long bloody streaks down the wall as they had tried to run all the way down to the bottom before running out of momentum.

He noticed to his shock that the drops seemed to be getting more frequent and larger which of course made the trail easier to follow but also adversely worsened Mike's expectation of what he expected to find at the end of it! He instinctively slowed down as he could tell by the size of the drops and the numerous amount of them that he must be coming to the end of this trail of tragedy.

A second later Mike thought he heard something from just around the next corner , clenching the torch firmly and bracing himself for the unknown he sprung round the corner not sure what he would find! He quickly rounded the corner to find his Fran standing before him in one of the bare rooms that were along the corridor and his heart leapt with joy! But this joy quickly turned to shock as he looked to see the blood dripping from her hands, dripping from her SLASHED WRISTS!

"FRAN WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED ???-" Mike looked down as he screamed at Francesca and saw the blood-stained penknife from her backpack lying at her feet. He looked up at Francesca's emotionless face which conveyed no sigh of pain or panic and betrayed none of the thoughts going on inside her brain. Her eyes stared blankly into space and looked through him as if he was a ghost but he knew that if he didn't act fast enough then she would be the one who would become a ghost!

Taking out an old tissue he grabbed both her hands and wrapped it round them as he tried to stem the steady flow of blood from the crudely made gashes on her wrists. But the tissue was pathetically thin and was only large enough to go round her

wrists just once, soon blood was seeping through the wafer thin cloth as if it was a sieve and splashing down onto the floor like stormy rain.

Francesca offered no hindrance or help while Mike desperately tried to stop the bleeding ,it was as if she didn't care whether or not she lived or died. Mike could see her eyes start to roll as the severe blood loss started to take its toil, he knew then that if he didn't stop the bleeding within seconds then she would pass out and slip into a coma that she would never wake up from!

"Come on Fran stay with me stay with me! " he pleaded with her, but the only response he got from her were her eyelids as they started to droop.
"STAY WITH ME!" he ordered hoping that some how the words would pound their way into her brain.
Her eyes were starting to clamp down now like twin oysters clamping shut over 2 pearls. Mike tore of his back pack and pulled out the first piece of cloth that he could find- an expensive shirt that Francesca had bought him, it seemed quite ironic and somehow fitting that it should be used in saving her life. At least he hoped that it would save her life because it seemed to him that at the moment he was fighting a loosing battle from which she would die.

The thick shirt 's strong and superior stitching at first refused to yield to his strength as he tried to tear it in two , Mike could see now why it had cost so much! He gave it another almighty tug as he felt the stitching come unravelled, finally the shirt came apart in his hands with one long rip. as one stitch led to another being

unravelled and to yet another being unravelled till the strength contained in the shirt's stitching collapsed like a row of dominoes knocking each other down.

Wasting no time Mike tied one half of the ripped shirt tightly round one of Francesca's arms making a strongly knotted tourniquet which only he would be able to undo easily , he did the same for the other arm also making sure that tourniquet was also tight and hard to remove. He was now totally unsure of Francesca's state of mind, the only thing that he was sure of was that he did not put it pass her to try another suicide attempt or actually try to undo the bandages that would help keep her alive!

He glanced down at her wrists and offered up a prayer of thanks to God as he saw the bleeding slow to an ebb in both wrists. Carefully he took off her backpack, retrieved the fist aid box from it then took out some proper bandages and proceeded to dress her self-inflicted wounds diligently, making sure that they were tight enough to stay on but not too tight as to cause her extreme discomfort. A rosy colour was at last now returning to Francesca's cheeks while her pasty white face started to take on a healthy bright colour as her eye lids started to flicker.
"Come on baby!" he urged as he rubbed her hands hard "Come back to me ! You can do it! You WILL do it!" he encouraged her hopefully as life started to return to her fragile body .

Mike couldn't help but feel guilty for bringing her here in the first place. Even though she had wanted to come and would not have taken no for an answer he wondered if there could have been some way of stopping her! Although he searched his mind thoroughly

from top to bottom not leaving a single memory unturned for some way in which these terrible events could have been prevented he could find none . Even if there had been a way he reasoned to himself what good would it do to blame himself now? It would change nothing! He also knew that feeling guilt would only serve to hamper his thoughts and actions something that could have proved fatal for Francesca and himself as he was going to have to stay alert and keep his wits about him in order to bring them both safely through this hellish night

Francesca started to stir and moan in pain, but despite her painful and tired state Mike needed to find out who or what exactly he was up against up.
"What happened? " the slurred words slipped out of her mouth painfully as if she had to force them through some evil force that had imprisoned her mind
"That's exactly what I wanted to ask you Fran -you slashed your wrists. You tried to commit suicide!" he told her bluntly.
"W-W-What ? I don't believe it! why?" she stammered out, completely confused.
Mike lifted up one of her arms to show her the bandaged wrist.
"Look! You did this to yourself Fran! WHY?" he demanded.
"No! I couldn't ! I couldn't I wouldn't!" she protested weakly over and over again.
"If you didn't then who did Fran? Tell me what happened!" he asked in a more gentle manner.
"I don't remember, I just don't remember!" she wailed out in frustration as she fought to remember the events that would explain the terrible deed that she had committed.
"You must! You have to!" Mike's voice had taken on an air of

harshness as if he was trying to bully an answer out of her.
"I TELL YOU I DON'T REMEMBER!" Francesca shouted back intimidated and frightened by Mike's repetitive questions as if he didn't believe what she was saying to him.
"I'm sorry baby of course you don't. I believe you! " Mike replied in a much calmer matter as he gently stroked her face. " But I also believe that locked away in your subconscious mind is the answer which we're both looking for. If I'm to unlock that answer then I gonna have to hypnotise you. OK?" he asked patiently.

After a short pause Francesca nodded reluctantly in agreement , she knew that Mike was an experienced hypnotist but it didn't make her feel any easier about being put into an hypnotic trance and merely deepened her feelings of helplessness and vulnerability.
"Is it gonna be a light trance?" she asked hopefully praying that his answer would be yes, but her prayers on this occasion were not answered.
"I'm sorry Francesca it has to be a deep hypnotic trance. The answer's buried deep so we have to dig deep!" Mike declared solemnly to her.
"How about the lights?" she enquired hopefully as part of her still wanted to put off this inevitable exercise for ass long as possible.
"There's not enough time to get them working we have to get started right now!" Mike emphasised. "Anyway we've got enough light from the torch" Mike assured her as he put his torch near her, moving it to one side slightly when Francesca complained that it was shining in her face and making her eyes hurt.
"But what if the batteries run low" Francesca continued to fret.
"I've seen some candles in one of the corridors, we can use them if

needed. Now just lay back relax and clear your mind!" Mike replied patiently his calm , cool and collected tone never faltering.

Francesca lay back on the uncomfortable cold hard floor and started to clear her mind but the pain from her wrists kept on disrupting her concentration.

"Now how's your wrists feeling Fran?" Mike asked correctly anticipating the fact that the pain from her wrists could be a barrier to her going into a deep trance.
"Its not too bad it'll be fine!" she replied bravely not wanting to burden Mike further.

Fransesca closed her eyes and started to concentrate so hard that her brain started to ache, but she was at last able to expel the sensation of pain from spoiling her concentration and relegate it to a very dull throbbing feeling at the back of her mind. She started to empty her mind of all thoughts, ideas and notions to clear the way for Mike to put her in a deep hypnotic trance while her breathing slowed and became deeper as her mind's state of relaxation became deeper and more pronounced. She began to blot out all outside distractions and sensations till the only thing that would be allowed through would be Mike's voice. Leaning close to her, Mike instructed her to open her eyes which she immediately did, and speaking in a soothing manner he then told her to imagine herself as a huge ocean flowing into a river, flowing into a stream, flowing into a brook then finally flowing into a spring that went deep inside the earth.

Down and down Francesca's conscious mind went with that

spring that had come from deep inside the earth and as her conscious mind submerged it self from her thinking, Francesca's subconscious mind took hold and all the secrets that it contained came with it.

"Francesca can you hear me?" Mike asked her gently but to no avail as Francesca remained as silence as a grave. Mike was unconcerned by this, it was quite normal for him to have to repeat the initial question before he got a reply from a hypnotised subject. He believed that the subconscious mind needed a little time to adjust to being given such a direct control to the speech centres of the brain.

He moved closer to her and as he did so the torchlight started to flicker slightly causing Mike to immediately regret not using one of the giant regal looking candle holders that he had seen earlier , although the thick waxen candles that they contained were plastered in dust their wicks were still visible and therefore obviously useable.

"Francesca are you there?" he repeated patiently, still he got no reply, concern started to creep into his thinking. He should have had a reply by now instead her mouth remained frozen unchanged by anything that he had said, perhaps if he-

"Francesca is not here!" the voice cut off his thoughts sharply. Francesca's lips had barely moved in order to utter those words and even though they had come from her they had not come in her voice. The voice sounded almost the way that you might expect a wolf to talk if it had human speech.

"Who are you?" Mike asked intrigued with this mysterious being that seemed to have invaded her mind.
"Who are YOU?" the voice came back.
Mike cleared his throat and replied in a clear voice "My name is Mike Lawrence! What's your name?"
"You do not need to know my name" the voice snapped back bristling with anger. "What are you doing here?" it continued in the same manner.
"And what are you doing inside Francesca?" phrased Mike carefully anxious to extract as much information as possible but also realising that this being might be enraged by him answering its question with a question.
There was no answer.
"I'll answer your questions if you answer mine!" proposed Mike as he tried to coax a response from it.
A moment fleeted by while the torch dimmed then brightened again, finally a reply came swiftly and unexpectantly in the form of a long slow discernible nod from Francesca . Mike almost rubbed his hands in eager anticipation of the information which he hoped to obtain!
"But first you answer mine" it authoritatively pronounced damping Mike's jubilation who now stared transfixed at Francesca, waiting impatiently to see what this being had to ask.
"How many of you are here?" it asked.
Pangs of suspicion shot through Mike's mind at being asked such an obvious and straight- forward question, perhaps it was playing with him , testing him to see if he was going to be truthful with it by asking him such a simple question.
"Just the two of us!" Mike stated blandly , reining his willpower

in which was tempting him to give more information than was asked.
"How long do you intend to stay?" the voice droned on.
"Just till morning" Mike replied in a clipped tone, still very careful not to give away anything that he didn't have to.
Mike prepared himself for another question which he had decided would be the last question that he would allow before demanding some answers of his own!
But there was no more questions only a slight sniggering as if it was in on some joke that he was not aware of.
"WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING?" a frustrated Mike angrily shouted "TELL ME!" he raged.
As if to taunt Mike further the snigger grew into a fully blown laughter and then into a evil cackle.

"WHO ARE YOU? WHAT ARE YOU?" Mike continued to interrogate the being that had occupied Francesca's mind, but it was of no use and his questions were drowned in the excessive scornful laughter coming from it.
"ANSWER MY QUESTIONS NOW!" Mike yelled at the top of his voice, and answer the being did! It answered all the questions and perhaps more, not that Mike could tell especially as all the answers that it gave were in a language that he couldn't understand at all! The being had tricked him by inventing its own rules and throwing away the ones that Mike had laid down.
"TELL ME! TELL ME SO THAT I CAN UNDERSTAND!" Mike roared with frustration at not being able to halt the raucous laughter that was torturing his eardrums!

Mike was in a desperate race against time. He knew that he had to

bring Fransesca out of the trance right now before any permanent damage was done to her! Snapping his fingers he tried to gain the attention of Francesca's conscious mind but it was no use! The sinister being in her mind was blocking all his attempts to establish contact. Mike resorted to clapping his hands loudly but even this was not able to penetrate the barrier built up by the force residing within her!

Not knowing what else to do he clamped his hand firmly over her mouth in the hope that it might somehow muffle the noise may be even stop it completely if he was lucky. He wasn't, and the laughter continued even more vindictively than before! Though at least the volume had been vastly diminished which Mike was grateful for but even that didn't last long when the laughter's previously loud volume came back with a vengeance but not from Francesca , this time it came from all around him, this time it came from the room itself!
Mike swung round trying to locate the laughter , it seemed to be coming from the walls or ceiling or was it the floor? He turned to the now silent Francesca, who lay as lifeless as a fallen statue made of porcelain. Mike rushed over to her ignoring the tirade of laughter coming at him from all sides. Grabbing her, he vigorously shook her.

"FRAN WAKE UP! WAKE UP NOW!" he commanded sternly. The laughter was now becoming deafening and he felt that his eardrums were going to burst and bleed. The pain from the laughter hit him hard, so hard that he had to let go of her and grip his ears tightly to try and block the noise out. The scornful laughter penetrated deep inside his brain and grew a thousand-fold

within a second! .If he had felt that by ripping his ears off the pain might have ceased then he would have found the strength to do so! Mike clumsily tried to stand up but fell to his knees and rolled up into a tight ball as if to lessen the surface areas which the laughter's sound waves could attack.

He struggled to stretch out a hand to Francesca but he couldn't bear the resulting crescendo of pain! Ashamed he pulled his hand from her unable to help her , unable to help anyone including himself. He tried to make the foetal position that he was in tighter till he thought that his arched back might snap at any minute and that his knees would be cramped and forever locked in their pulled up position!

Mike seriously believed at that moment that both Francesca and he were going to die in that room at that moment together but also separated- each of them trapped in their own solitary hellish limbo- but he had to help Francesca! She trusted him! She needed him! He wasn't gonna let her down!

"YOU'RE NOT GONNA WIN !" he shouted defiantly as the laughter closed in around him.
"YOU'RE NOT GONNA WIN WHATEVER YOU ARE!" he yelled again.

Using this new found adrenaline powered strength which had sprung out of his love for Francesca, slowly , very slowly he started to straighten out his knees and back as he prepared to fight back. Twisting himself upwards by pushing up with his elbow he swivelled round to Francesca , he knew that if he didn't get them

both out of this room soon then they would both perish where they laid.

He felt his strength falter as he started to get up, but one glance at his helpless Francesca restored his power instantly and gave him the willpower to stand on his own two feet, while all around him the cackling still scrapped away at his consciousness with sharp claws.
"I'm coming Fran I'm coming." he whispered barely audibly as he forced himself forward to his love with his hands clamped firmly over hiss ears.
Mike started to count the steps that he made , each step although so small seemed a massive achievement in itself against the noise that was cajoling him and bombarding him from all sides.
"Come on you can do it !" he encouraged himself much heartened by the fact that he estimated that he was no more than 5 steps away from rescuing the one he loved. Mike lurched 1 pace forward.

Fran was now just 4 steps away.

He felt as if his neck had been stretched upwards from his head and was swimming 100 feet up from his body as the pain was now creating an ultra light-headed feeling in his brain.

3 steps away.

He felt as if his head had now been DETACHED from his body due to the pain being so intense!

2 steps away.

His brain was screaming to be let out of his skull, its heavy throbbing sounding like a fist heavily pounding against a lead door.

Just 1 more step away.

Through his agony Mike felt elated as he saw how close he was too his goal and scraped his feet nosily along the floor.

He was there !

Mike stood for a few seconds to savour his triumph. A few seconds was all that he could
manage before the agony reminded him of its presence , bit a chunk out of his strength and spat it out.!

He knew that what he had just gone through to get to Francesca had been comparatively easy to the task that he had to accomplish now! He looked at the corridor outside shrouded in darkness. He had a small lighter that he could use to light one of the candles he had seen out there -if they made it that far! Hopefully out there they would be out of earshot of the main brunt of this unearthly noise!

He looked down at the unconscious Fran and saw the blood dripping erratically from her left ear and realised that time was short for both of them. Mike realised that he wouldn't last 2 seconds if he removed his hands in order to pick her up in his

present state! He could barely stand as it was! There was only one way he could do it- if he hypnotised himself!

Taking a deep breath he prepared to plunge himself into a hypnotic trance but he knew that he would have to gauge the level very, very carefully . There would be no room for error. If his judgement was wrong they would die if it was right then they would remain alive- at least for the time being.

Mike slowed his breathing down to the level that he thought would be right- too deep a trance and he would move too slowly or worse still be totally immobile. Too light a trance and the pain would continue to rip his brain to shreds.

Mike started to mentally construct a building in his mind with his brain in the centre of it, safe and protected. The building's walls were thick , and enforced by a titanium metal lining which stretched upwards all the way up to the sky . He mentally inspected the foundations making sure that they were deep and strong, when he was satisfied with the inspection . He then started to construct the roof that was also made of titanium girders that criss-crossed each other, so many were there of these girders that they hid the sky from his protected brain. Finally a 2 inch thick layer of titanium was laid on top and welded down sealing his consciousness in but keeping the pain out. Mike now felt ready and slowly removed his hands from his ears.

A rush of laughter flooded in surrounding the secure building that encased his consciousness. Like a tide the laughter and the pain beat against it and rose higher and higher like a wave threatening

to engulf it, but it could not and contented itself with pounding against all sides of the structure hoping to find a crevice or small crack which it could enlarge into a hole and therefore enter drowning Mike in a sea of pain!

Bending down Mike scooped up Francesca in his arms and turned stiffly in the direction of the room entrance.

Mike took a step forward.

The sea of pain smashed itself against Mike's building in a demented fashion desperately trying o find away through but the structure did not yield to its pressure.

Mike took a step forward

The sea of pain had found something- nothing big just a slight hairline fracture that had developed in Mike's building!

Mike took a step forward

The sea of pain bolstered by the small but definite progress that it had made was joined by another ocean of pain that came cascading in , in the form of a waterfall , forcing the water level up and up to the roof and beyond till the whole structure was now underwater. Mike hadn't made his building completely waterproof it was only a matter of time before the flood burst in!

Mike took another step forward.

The pain had found a crack , not large but large enough for there to be a steady drip drip of pain running down the inside of the wall tracing a slow path to the bottom and inevitably into his brain.

Mike stopped.

The first drop of pain had dripped into his brain ceasing up his muscles into a paralysis as he shuddered in hideous dread of what was to follow . The doorway could not be more than 2 steps away he had to be strong not only for his sake but also for Francesca as well.

Mike took another step.

He had the musty dusty smell from the corridor in his nostrils now, he could smell victory that was only seconds away. He started to take the final step that would take them to the entrance and freedom. Francesca laid limp in his hands , though she was thankfully light the combined strain of shielding himself from the pain and the desperation of the situation had drained his nervous energy to the last drop making her feel 100 times heavier than she was! Mike gritted his teeth for the final push to salvation -

Then the pain struck.

Mike didn't feel it coming until it was too late to stop it. The powerful jet of pain had bored a gaping hole through the wall and had bludgeoned a way through his willpower making an easy path for the rest of the ocean to come flooding in with its icy razor

covered fingertips that seeked revenge for being held back for so long! When the dreaded moment arrived and it made contact with him it fell upon his consciousness like a sledge hammer on a clay vase, not only breaking a way into his consciousness but shattering it into a thousand pieces as well.

Feeling as if two giants were stamping up and down his shoulders Mike fell to his knees with Francesca still tightly gripped in his hands.

Mike swayed from side to side drunk on the pain whirling round in his head. The pain's intoxicating influence making him want to do nothing except fall flat on his face and not get up. But he wasn't going to go without a fight! He was fighting this agonising sensation but it was a battle that he was loosing rapidly!

Concentrating all his energy on his right knee he managed to nudge it forward slightly , he then switched his attention to the other knee and did the same. It was almost a revelation to him that by not spreading his concentration thinly and by only concentrating all his willpower on a selected area he was able to effectively combat the opposing pain and although he was definitely not pushing it out of his mind , he was at least holding it at bay therefore creating a stalemate which given the circumstances was a kind of victory! But it was a victory that was on the verge of being snatched from him when he felt that he couldn't make another step forward with his other knee! Mike imagined himself as he must look- struggling pathetically on his knees, humiliated by the laughter being thrown at him.

Suddenly a second wave of pain rushed over him causing him to crash down towards the floor. As he saw the hard floor looming up towards him in one last futile effort he tried to throw Francesca clear of the room, but the best that he could mange was to lay her down as gently as possible in front of him before his head collided with the hard floor.

They were just 1 foot away from the doorway.

Mike could no longer feel his legs or body as pain numbing stiffness steadily crept up his body towards his brain.There was only one last thing that he could do, desperately he tried to work his arms while he still had use of them! His hands were still clinging doggedly to Francesca and by using all the dwindling strength contained in them he could just about manage to push her very slowly along the floor. Mike swore to himself that he would at least save her life even if he couldn't save his own!

Francesca was now 6 inches away from the doorway!

Mike could no longer move his body but could still just about move his hands. Straining his fingertips till he thought that the bones might jump out of their sockets, he nudged her forward his fingers aching, with the effort but it was working! IT WAS WORKING!

Francesca was now only 3 inches away from the doorway!

In a final surge of power he pushed as hard and as long as he could., which flipped her over and THROUGH THE DOORWAY

, Mike managed a small smile before his brain finally succumbed to the deluge that engulfed his consciousness, his thoughts and which would now finally quench the flame of his life. Mike mercifully passed out before he could feel that happen.

Mike awoke to find himself surrounded by darkness and he wondered if he could be in hell. Then a soothing familiar voice came and with it an equally soothing touch on his forehead.
"Thank God! You're awake !" Francesca rejoiced as she peered at him through the dark gloom.
"What happened ?- I-" Mike couldn't continue and closed his eyes to try and get his memories back.
"I was hoping that you might be able to answer that!" Francesca replied disappointed. As she adjusted the bandage on her right wrist that had become loose.

Mike caught a brief glimpse of the ugly wound under the slightly red-stained bandage and the whole nightmare came crashing back like an unwanted disease that he had caught again.
" I remember now !We were trapped in the room Fran when I tried to hypnotise you! There was something inside of you something-"
"Yes baby go on! Go on!" she pleaded.

"Something-something evil" Mike forced out.
" Evil?" Francesca repeated her eyes wide open "What evil?"
"I don't know exactly! It tried to destroy us-it almost succeeded . I don't understand how I got out after you-"he continued confused.
"I came out of the hypnotic trance after you got me out in the corridor, if it wasn't for you I would have died you saved my life-"

"You could see me?" Mike asked amazed.
"I saw everything! I heard everything but I couldn't do anything-not a thing!" she sobbed at the thought of what Mike had gone through to save her. Large tears rolled down her cheeks and splashed on Mike's face.

"Its OK now Fran! Its OK now!" he reassured her as he tried to raise one of his still exhausted arms and place it round her, at first he couldn't and had to let it flop down uselessly next to him. He tried again and this time managed to drape it round her loosely.
"I had to pull you out the rest of the way. I thought that you were dead!" she sobbed out in between her tears.
"I would have said goodbye first!" Mike joked with a forced smile on his face.

Francesca didn't return the smile, instead a deeply worried look spread across her face. Mike could see how deep it was by the furrow lines traversing her forehead and the implacable frown on her mouth.
"What if that thing is still in me? What if it tries to make me kill myself again?" she asked terrified.
"No I won't allow it Fran , if you're threatened by it then I'll protect you-always!" he promised solemnly as he looked directly into her eyes.
"Anyway!" he began cheerfully, "If it was still in you -it would hardly have let you pull me out of that room! Would it?" he concluded logically.
"But what are we gonna do now that we're trapped in this damned place?" she asked despairingly
"Only till morning" he corrected.

"That's longer than I can bear!" panicked Francesca.
"If we keep together then we'll be strong- too strong for it to come between us" Mike promised her.

He tried to sit up but grimaced and would have fallen back down if Francesca hadn't caught him just in time. Mike nodded his thanks and with some more assistance from her was able to get to his feet.

He surveyed the room that they were in, his eyes trying to make out any details. The only light came from a candle in a tall faded brass candle holder, its solitary flame acting like a miniature beacon on a dark night . The room that they had taken refuge in was large but mainly bare . The only items populating it were just some antique looking pieces of furniture- a chair, and a table. Their stationary appearances in direct contrast to their shadows that danced about in the flickering candle flame.

He started to edge his way forward to the open doorway to see if he could hear anything or see anything. Even that was a long painful torturous trip and though he could feel his strength returning with every minute he still needed Francesca to help support him.

When he got to the doorway he cautiously and slowly poked his head round , peered down one direction of the gloomy hallway then the other way. He heard nothing just the golden sound of silence, but also adversely he could see nothing down the black-clad corridors either. He had to see what else was in this house but as he moved to take a step forward out of the room Francesca

froze rigid with fear.

"Want do yer think yer doing Mike? You can't go out there!" cried out a panic-stricken Francesca.
"Why not?" Mike bit back unintentionally exposing an angry tone to his voice.
Francesca immediately looked hurt by the way that Mike had spoken to her, who felt ashamed and relented from a further angry outburst.

"I'm sorry Fran I didn't mean to snap like that its just-" he started to apologise in an attempt to patch up the damage that he had done.
"Its OK Mike I understand- you don't have to say you're sorry I already know you are!" she interrupted him in her usual docile understanding tone usually reserved for when she wanted to talk him into doing something that she know that he really hated.

She placed one of her slender fingers on his mouth to show that he didn't have to say anymore then kissed him lightly on his lips.
"We'll be safer in here till the morning comes! There's nothing but death out there waiting for us you know that!"she reasoned.

An ever growing larger part of Mike agreed with her but there was still a part of him that wanted to try and finish what they had come to do -their equipment was all here somewhere and he was sure that he could find the electric mains box again. Besides at the back of his mind he knew that they were not truly safe anywhere in the house. The thing that had almost destroyed Francesca and himself could come back at anytime and anywhere. The whole house

could be its domain and he and Francesca were two alien foreign bodies intruding where they were not wanted!

It would of course inevitably try to wipe them out and remove them from this place -it had no choice in the matter just like they had no choice but to find it and study it. A study that would hopefully tell them where its weak spot was, when they found that out then they would have a fighting chance to defend themselves and fight against it hopefully destroying it or driving it out of the house!

Turning to Francesca he uttered the words that would ring true with her and make her realise that they had no choice but to try and fight the evil presence.
"If we don't destroy it then it will destroy us Fran!"

Francesca remained silent for a while as if trying to pluck up enough courage in her mind to admit that Mike was right and that attack was going to be their best form of defence.

Francesca nodded solemnly.

She knew that they had no option but that didn't necessarily make this choice an easier or safer option than any other. If anything it would mean them going after this monster and coming up against it sooner rather than waiting for it to come to them later.

"I trust you Mike!" she reassured him
"I won't let you down I promise Fran!" he replied confidently and hugged her tightly.

Mike took the candle out of the heavy brass holder that was too cumbersome to carry around, then found a piece of rag and wrapped it round the bottom part of the candle tightly so that the hot wax running down wouldn't burn him. He and Francesca then made their way as quickly as they could to the room door that opened up into the dark interior world of the house. Just before they embarked on their mission Mike turned to look at Francesca, she was already looking at him and each could see what the other was thinking- that now more than ever they needed to be able to love and trust each other as their survival depended on them being able to work together and believe in each other!

"Ready Fran?" he asked after a moment's pause during which he had been looking into her hypnotic brown eyes.
"I'm as ready as I'll ever be!" she replied cheerfully, but not cheerfully enough for Mike to notice the underlying nervousness in her voice which threatened to detonate into an explosion of uncontrolled panic. Gripping her hand tightly Mike led her out into the shadows leaving the room behind them cast in one giant shadow of darkness.

Francesca pointed in the direction of the room that she thought she had half-dragged , half-carried Mike from . A room that they had abandoned the equipment that they needed to conduct their study. With their hands tightly gripped together they both started off down that way in the hope that they would be retracing their steps.

The walls and floor seemed even stranger now in the fragile light

that Mike carried, a light which held the key to them seeing and therefore was at the moment their key to surviving.

Each of them were now both self-absorbed in the obsession of uncovering their original route as they half-edged half-felt their way through the cloaked shrouded passages. Suddenly without warning Francesca halted dead in her tracks and looked about frightened.

"What's that ?" demanded Francesca breathlessly.
"What's what?" queried Mike as puzzled as Francesca was scared.
"That damn noise ! That's what! Are you deaf?" she accused insultingly.

Mike strained his ears to listen , it felt so quiet that he was sure that he would have heard a pin drop, but nothing reached his ears.

"Look Fran I can't hear-" he began pessimistically
"Shut up!" Francesca interrupted loudly and rudely " Now for crying out loud listen !" she continued in a brusque manner.

Mike once more forced himself to try and hear what Francesca was hearing. He wondered what it said of the mental state of a person who was hearing things that weren't there? Could it be worse than people who saw things that weren't there ? He doubted that! Both were most probably an equally sinister sign of a detrimental mental state. Either way it didn't look good for Francesca who might now be exhibiting another form of madness or possession! Could the spirit have taken hold of her again and was now playing more cruel tricks on her that would send her

tormented mind over the edge into insanity?

He mulled over these unpleasant thoughts in his mind as he tried to listen to what was not there. He was just going to turn to Francesca to shake his head despondently when he heard something! He turned his head sharply to get a better position so that he might decipher the noise that he was hearing but the sound did not care to repeat itself so Mike took another step in the direction that it had come and waited patiently... nothing came.

"Do you hear it now?" ventured Francesca hopefully relieved in the knowledge that she was not alone in her madness. Mike answered her non-verbally by putting up his hand to request that she stop moving and talking. He needed complete silence if he was to hear that noise again which sounded so distant and faint.

'Yes! There it was again!' Mike thought to himself triumphantly, elated that it proved that Francesca wasn't hearing things and was therefore not mad , it didn't take long for this sudden euphoria to be wiped away when he realised that he might be suffering from some sort of aural madness that was also causing him to hear imaginary sounds in which case they might both be going mad!

Although the distance and the maze of corridors between them and this sound muffled its identity, Mike could just about guess that it sounded like an unmistakable shuffle of feet!

"There's somebody else here with us!" Francesca screeched in a high- pitched glass shattering voice as she jumped over like a startled cat to Mike's side , her nails digging in like a set cat's

claws into his arm.

Another similar sound floated towards them from one of the many corridors somewhere in the structure causing Francesca to grip his arm even tighter, almost causing them to bleed.

"Let's not jump to conclusions Fran it might not be what we think!" Mike logically concluded in a calm manner.
"Then what the hell is it?" screamed Francesca the last of her nerves shredding away .
"It sounds like feet but it could be-it could be" he repeated as he vainly clutched at straws to come up with a solution that would not alarm Francesca anymore than she was already.
" COULD BE WHAT ? COULD BE WHAT?" She reiterated again and again each time more demented and insane than the last!

Mike was really starting to think that Francesca had now taken complete leave of her senses to be left only with a hollowed out brain which knew nothing except the bare instinctive emotion of PANIC!

"It could be just - an echo!" he tried to explain. Mike regretted those words as soon as they left his mouth but it was too late, Francesca rounded on him like a rabid dog seizing the opportunity to tear his feeble excuse apart.

"ECHO?" she yelled unbelievably at what she saw was the crass stupidity of such a reason even being proffered!
"ECHO?" the spiteful anger in her voice was mixed with a

mocking tone further empathsized by a smirk on her face.

Mike could obviously see that she was starting to see the comical side of his serious remark. In defence he held up his hands in an effort to hold back the torrent of abuse that must be building up inside her and which at any moment would be unleashed like lightening on his ears, most probably burning them off in the process!
"Listen to me for a sec Fran" he pleaded "Don't you see it could be some sort of delayed echo, we only hear a sound when we make a sound !" he argued convincingly.

"Well why the hell didn't we hear it before now? "she shot back incredulously.
"It could be any number of reasons , maybe we were too wrapped up in what we were doing to notice the echo the first time! After all its only a small noise! It would be easy for us to overlook it with all the noise we were making and the rush that we were in!" Mike rattled on piling one reason on top of another hoping that any counter-argument that she had would be buried by them. Unfortunately it was Francesca who ended up burying his argument in one mind-stumping question.
"Then why don't we hear our own voices echoing?" she barked at him.
Mike was speechless.. but only for a second.
"It could be that different levels of sound take different times to bounce back to us , maybe they have already and we just haven't heard them." he suggested.
"You don't what the hell you're talking about, you're making up your own theories and not talking about facts!" she guessed

intuitively.

Of course Francesca was RIGHT as far as Mike was concerned he might well be talking a load of crap! All that he was doing was putting up a thin smoke -screen in order to hide the haunting truth that there was every possibility that someone or something was following them! But he wasn't going to let Francesca know that and he continued the semi-ruse.
"Look Fran what I'm saying has got some facts to support it, its not all pie in the sky theories! Look at the unusually number of corridors, their irregular angles and the fact that there's barely a stick of furniture in the place- its just a deprived empty shell. All theses factors combined could have such an abnormal echo effect! Its possible isn't it?"

The expression on Francesca's face was as hard as the stone floor that they were walking along her and showed her immunity to Mike's arguments. She had no intention of yielding to his point of view.
"It is possible isn't it Fran? C'mon Fran you may not believe that it's happened the way I said it did! But it COULD have happened the way I said it did!"

Mike stared hotly at her icy face and her hard-as-nails expression quickly thawed .
Francesca nodded slightly while murmuring half to herself. "Yeah its possible but still not bloody likely!"
"Well we'll see won't we?" he replied satisfied.

Mike allowed himself a slight smile, at least she had accepted the

possibility that she might be wrong and that he might be right! His smile was further extended when he heard a slightly murmuring echo that sounded faintly like Francesca! His own echo soon came back in quick reply!

"You see!" said Mike smugly "Just an echo! That's all it is you little baby!" he scolded teasingly, feeling pretty relieved that not only had he convinced Francesca that the noises that they heard were harmless and posed no threat to them , but just as equally important he had also convinced himself that these noises weren't worth a first thought, never mind a second thought and could be easily explained away!

They resumed their lonely trek with only the echo of their footsteps to keep them company through the impoverished house that must have once held such sumptuous treasures. They felt better now that they knew that the distant noises that they heard were only echoes and they both moved as quickly as they could while listening to the sound of the echo of their running feet - there was just one problem that dawned on them simultaneously- THEY WEREN'T RUNNING ! THEY WERE STILL WALKING! As if they had read each other's horrified thoughts they stared wide-eyed at each other, halted sharply and listened . They listened to the sound of running , running that was no longer distant but which instead was getting closer and closer with each step. The noise gave no clue as to which direction it was coming from and in fact the only inadequate clue it gave was that it seemed to be coming from ALL directions simultaneously. Francesca and Mike looked hopelessly at each other not sure what to do, but sure of one thing- if they failed to do something right

now then the consequences would be fatal for both of them!

Then the voices came.

At first they couldn't make out what they were saying but with each step those ghostly running feet took so the clarity of these voices improved and they recognised the voices as being their OWN! But these voices were no echo of their own!

"WE WILL HAVE THEM SOON! " the male voice that sounded like Mike boomed out in a murderous tone and repeated this threat again and again, as if joining in some sinister chorus the female voice that sounded like Francesca joined in "WE WILL HAVE THEM SOON!" Again and again it repeated this in the same murderous tone as its male counterpart, sometimes they would say it together , sometimes alternately, but there was always someone or something echoing that threat.

Mike and Francesca had both heard enough of these 2 possible doppelgangers and though their feet had been frozen in fear, the prospect of dying unfroze those feet and propelled them in a headlong sprint for their lives!

The candlestick was the first casualty of the chase. Its flame went out immediately and they had to flee in the darkness , blinded by the night they ran aimlessly colliding with a wall in an effort to escape the unknown terror behind them! Sending both of them sprawling to the rocky floor beneath them! As Mike fell to the ground he felt the candle yanked out of his hand . He didn't know whether it was by unseen forces or because he caught it on

something , in either case he didn't wait to find out or waste what little time they had scurrying about searching for the missing candle! Instead, keeping hold of Francesca's clammy hand he got to his feet and brought out his lighter ,he flipped the lid -it lit first time. He had prudently set the flame length to its highest point which would at least give them maximum illumination and lessen the chance of it blowing out while they ran.

They took flight in the direction that they had originally been going in, though they had no idea whether or not this would take them into the jaws of the waiting monsters or out of their reach! But their frantic strides were now being outpaced by the unknown beings behind them, whose voices grew ever louder and excited as they closed in on their prey!

"How much further Fran?" cried out Mike.
"I don't know! I don't know!" an exasperated Francesca shouted back
"It can't be much further! It just can't be! Oh God help us! Please Lord!" Mike begged.
"I can't go on much further . I can hardly breath" Francesca wheezed out in a gasp of breath.
"Don't stop now! Whatever you do don't stop now!" Mike ordered her.
"I can't go on I just can't. Please slow down Mike I can't keep up" Francesca entreated him pitifully.
"We can't slow down we gotta keep going or we're DEAD! Do yer hear me Fran? DEAD!" Mike shouted hoarsely.
Francesca had no breath to spare for talking and could only groan and puff away furiously as she tried to keep up with Mike and

away from the entities behind them.
The voices behind them were now constantly getting louder and turning into a bone-chilling long shriek that sounded as though it came from something inhuman.

Suddenly Francesca felt something on her neck. She couldn't describe it physically as her back was turned but with its touch three sensations flooded her mind-.It was hot! It was burning! It was evil!

She would have screamed if she had had the breath but her all her breath was nearly spent and all she could do was open her mouth in a silent shriek. She tried to twist round to face the horror whose breath she could feel on the bare nape of her neck but Mike's hand gripped her shoulder and stopped her, he knew that whatever thing was behind her was too evil a sight for her (and himself!) to behold and keep running unabated. Once they had clapped eyes on this thing it would root them to the spot if only for a second , and that single second would be enough for it to seize them and devour them for ever.

'They had to keep going! THEY HAD TO KEEP GOING!' The thought consumed Mike's mind till no other thought remained, he could feel the foul breath of this thing as it shed all pretence to being human and showed its true form through its inhuman snorting and rasping.

Mike felt his grip on Francesca's shoulder get weaker as his body started to tire rapidly from the running, he felt Francesca's throbbing pulse cruising through her shoulder and felt her fear

fuelled strength that wanted her to twist round - and WOULD twist her round if he let go of her!

Gathering what little breath he had between his strides he warned Francesca "Don't look round! You mustn't look round Fran ! Keep going we'll soon be there, We'll soon be -" Mike couldn't bring himself to say anymore and his words collapsed into gasps for breath.

They rounded a corner and like an escape hatch from a disaster they saw the room where their equipment was, too tired to be happy they simply staggered on drunkenly over the last few metres to their safe-haven.
Mentally Mike counted the yards off in his mind wondering if they might live to see the inside of that room where they had almost died. It might have seemed madness to come back here but they had no choice!

They were now barely 2 yards from the doorway and the thing behind them was still hot on their heels and almost ready to pounce on them and squash the life out of them. Its acrid breath filled the air with the foulest of stench which made human sewage smell like perfume by comparison!

Mike had no more strength to cajole Francesca to go faster, all he could manage was just to drag her along roughly as if she was a life-size rag doll. They were no more than 3 strides away from safety but on the back of his neck he felt a blast of breath so hot and scolding that he felt his skin was going to sizzle and be burnt off! Mike knew instinctively that they had no more time left to run

any further!

Francesca skidded and started to fall to the floor but Mike seized her by her slim waist then pushed off as hard as he could on his right foot. A push so hard that his bones almost creaked under the immense pressure put on them by his powerful jump!

He leapt into the air and sailed through it with an exhausted Francesca entwined around him, the remaining 2 yards flew under them in a second and they landed heavily in the room . Without even looking upwards to come face to face with their pursuer Mike kicked the door shut while still laying sprawled on the floor with Francesca. Then after unravelling himself from the arms and legs wrapped around him he hurled himself at the old oak door like a Rhinoceros but not to batter it down but to stop it from being battered down! Instinctively Mike put the large wooden latch across it and placing his back right up against the door he pushed hard letting all his body weight sink into his back and set like a rock hard barricade, as he waited in nervous anticipation for the earth shuddering earthquake that was bound to come at any second against the door!

"Fran -get the chairs! Anything! Hurry!" he pleaded as she slowly got to her feet a little dizzy from their clumsy landing. Looking about she picked up a chair and ran over with it.

"Thanks!" Mike's voice was a mixture of gratitude and dread that the pathetic barricade that they were attempting to build would not hold the beast at bay and be swept away in an instant like a flimsy wooden hut during a hurricane. He also realised that he daren't

leave the door as his weight was the main constituent of this barricade and that the thing outside could come charging at the door at anytime and break through it as it was made of matchstick wood!

He had one overriding worry- Why the hell hadn't it struck already? It had been right behind them and could surely have followed them right into the room if it had wanted to! What was it waiting for? Mike tried to search his brain for a logical answer but found none.

The thing's indecision might have bought them a few precious minutes but with that extra time came extra time to be anxious and extra time for them to wait dreading that moment when their life could be ended at any time! Both of them stood there silent and breathless knowing that at any time the moment would come when their lives would be ended without warning!

They waited with bated breath, not daring to move, not daring to talk in case it drew attention to them and gave off a scent that not only were they prey but that they were frightened prey vulnerable to attack, a vulnerability that could incite an onslaught from the beast that was presumably prowling about outside!

Mike put his ear slowly and silently against the door in the hope of hearing something outside, but if there was something it was keeping perfectly still! It was Francesca who dared to speak first albeit in a diminutive and subdued tone.
"Do you think its gone?" her eyes darting about seeking some movement that might give a clue as to what lurked out there.

"I don't know Fran! I just don't know " he replied truthfully knowing that it would do him no good to hide the truth from her no matter how bad it was.
"We're both gonna die tonight aren't we?" she asked flatly as if it was a statement rather than a question.

Mike was just going to repeat the answer that he had given to the previous question when pangs of guilt bit into his conscious and would not allow him to be so ignorant to her as to their possible fate.
"No we're not!" he whispered softly to her. "We're gonna survive!" he tried to assure her, his voice tinged with feigned confidence, calm and steady on the surface but trembling and scared underneath. But it was a confidence that he was starting to believe in as well , perhaps everything would be alright they were safe here for the time being -at least until morning when they would make good their escape. All they needed to do was sit tight and hang on till morning he was sure of that!

He couldn't have been more wrong!

A crashing noise shattered all their confidence hopes in an instant.
"WHAT THE-" Mike wasn't able to finish his sentence before another crashing sound cut him off. This time a severe shaking that shook the room from top to bottom accompanied it, sending Francesca and Mike tumbling over.

The dimly dark room took on a blood red hue which grew intensely with every fleeting second till the whole room glowed

a fiery deep red illuminating everyone and everything in there.

Mike tried to get to his feet by using the now vibrating wall as a support while he crawled back up right. His nails tried without success to get a grip on the smooth walls which had not so much as even a crack for him to get some stability from. The best that he was able to do was lay his hands flat against the slippery walls in the hope that they would develop some traction , this only ended in him having his hopes dashed as they slid helplessly all over the wall like a pair of first time ice skaters.

He glanced over to Francesca to see how she was doing- it seemed impossible but she seemed in a worse state than he was! Her thin frail hands flaying about uselessly trying to grab on to something as the room continued to heave and groan under the unnatural external pressures being put on it
" MIKE!" she yelled , her hands outstretched in a frantic plead for help from her boyfriend.

Mike tried to respond to this SOS but the rippling stone floor which seemed more like plastascine buffered him back with its grey hard waves . Francesca tried to stand up but was thrown off balance by the ever fluctuating room, she tried again and failed again and looked as if she was drowning in a sea of stone that wanted to encase her and fossilise her!
"HOLD ON FRAN!" he yelled back as he half-waded half-climbed over the pulsating floor. Francesca fell forward just as Mike's footing was dislodged on a huge ripple that he was negotiating also sending him falling forward. They caught each other awkwardly, but that didn't matter so long as they were

together, so as long as they were alive!

"WHAT'S HAPPENING MIKE? WHAT'S HAPPENING?" she repeated again and again like a broken gramophone record .Mike wished that he had an answer but he had none , all he knew was that if they didn't get out of this room quickly then it would become their burial plot. It seemed only a matter of time before the whole ceiling collapsed and the walls folded inwards smashing their brains out of their skulls and grinding their bones into powder. But while they had breath they had life and while they had life there was still hope , hope to find a way out of there!

"WE'RE GOTTA GET OVER TO THE DOOR AND GET OUT OF THIS DEATH TRAP!" he ordered Francesca resolutely.
"NO!" she screeched in absolute terror.

"YES!!" he contradicted her ,he had no time to have an orderly civilised discussion with her about her difference of opinion, in fact he had no time to have a blistering argument with her about it either ! All he could do was drag his wildly protesting girlfriend to the door that she dreaded to go through. Francesca struggled ceaselessly as she tried to get away from her captor as if she was being dragged to the edge of a cliff.
"TRUST ME FRAN! TRUST ME !YOU GOTTA TRUST ME!" He begged her as he tried to get her to use the love that she felt for him as a source of strength that could be used to face whatever he was willing to face. But when he looked into her eyes he saw that the love that had once been there was now replaced with blind panic which had cut her off from her true feelings towards him!

Mike pulled her as if she was a stubborn mule towards that door while she kicked ,screamed , even scratched him all the way to try and force him to accept her decision to stay in that room, but he knew that her decision would only result in them both dying! He knew that whatever danger was out there might or might not be waiting outside the door for them, but there was no mistaking that the only of getting away from the immediate danger in this room was through the door that they had just come!
"MIKE PLEASE STOP!" Francesca begged bewildered as Mike's strength started to dominate her movement and she felt herself propelled towards the door against her will.

He didn't answer her verbally but instead answered her with his actions! They were right next to the door now and Mike kicked the chair away then reached out straining to reach the latch while Francesca pulled back on his other hand trying to break free of his iron clad grip. Tired, she stopped struggling and let Mike reach out to pull the latch back, but he simultaneously also relaxed his grip on her slightly and adopted a less tense position to give his tired muscles a short rest.

Francesca saw her opportunity and didn't let it pass. Giving the hardest shortest sharpest tug that she could manage she caught him by surprise causing him to over-balance! At last she was able to break away from him and ran into a corner determined not to go anywhere with him.

"WE CAN'T STAY HERE!" Mike tried to reason with her while holding out his hand beckoning her to come with him.

"ARE YOU MAD ? WE CAN'T GO OUT THERE !YOU KNOW THAT THERE'S SOMETHING OUT THERE WAITING FOR US!" she shouted vehemently back at him.
"PLEASE FRAN WE'VE GOT TO GET GOING RIGHT NOW BEFORE ITS TOO LATE!" he begged her as he approached her holding out his hand again hoping and praying that she might take it, but instead she pushed herself further into her corner away from it as if his hand belonged to that of the Grim Reaper! By now the ground was shaking even more violently and Mike half expected a volcano to erupt in the middle of the room covering them with molten lava!

Then as suddenly as everything had started everything stopped. The floor stopped rippling and shaking, the ceiling stopped fluctuating and the walls stopped pulsating , everything stopped and became as it was before. Francesca and Mike stared at each other in disbelief as the room lost its volcanic glow, once more leaving Mike's lighter as their only light source. Each wondered how long that they would have to wait to find out what other shock the house would have in store for them.

They didn't have to wait long.

An eerie knocking echoed through out the room, it was coming from the door! Although the knocking was that of how any normal person might knock on a door, they both knew that it was no person doing this knocking! This time it was Mike's turn to back away from the door, his footsteps light and quick as if they dared not rest on the floor beneath them for a second longer than necessary. He moved all the way back to where Francesca was

cowering , instinctively they gripped each other's hand in mutual need and love, once more united against whatever was after them. Meanwhile the knocking just grew ever persistent and harder till the door shook so much that Mike expected it to spring off its hinges! Although they didn't know who or what they were dealing with the intentions of this creature was clear for all to see, it wanted to get in!

Mike still couldn't understand why it didn't just break the door down and finish them off! Perhaps it couldn't ! Perhaps it didn't WANT to! While the booming on the door grew louder and their fear got greater part of Mike's mind was able to dissect the situation logically and calmly, but this part was rapidly shrinking as the terror of the situation started to take hold! Mike rationalised that he had referred to this house as being a house of Hell other pieces of information carefully unearthed by Francesca had also given it similar titles, it dawned on him that the point of hell was to torment and punish continuously, if they were finished off now then the house might not be able to fulfil its primary want, namely to frighten as much without killing the hapless victims trapped inside. In which case they had nothing to fear from because at dawn they would be released from this hell their bodies and lives intact! Mike felt a deep sense of relief spreading over him like a warm glow! He felt easier knowing how it would turn out!

Unfortunately that feeling didn't last for long when he realised that if the house thought that he had such inside knowledge of its motive and agenda, it might well try to change the rules by increasing its torments even to the point when they might be scared to death or killed! Another opposing reason to his theory

quickly followed this one -the fact of the matter was that people HAD been killed in this house or died under strange circumstances those cases could certainly not support his weak theory that the house wished to only toy with people rather than destroy them!

Mike was immediately flung back into the present with the knowledge that their future was just as bleak and uncertain as before. The knocking had now been elevated into an ultra heavy booming which had reached ear splitting proportions. He immediately clamped his hands other his eardrums , he turned to Francesca to see that she had already done the same.

"WHY WON'T IT STOP?" she yelled in vain knowing that there could be no answer.
"STOP! STOP!STOP!" she continued to yell incessantly this time addressing the noise itself and the thing making it! But her cries of anguish fell on deaf ears with her only deeply buried solace being that Mike was beside her to share whatever fears or tribulations that she had to endure.

The booming was not only around them but in them causing their internal organs to jangle about like a bag of nails as well as causing their whole being to quake in unison to the rhythmic pounding. Francesca had by now given up any sort of futile effort to stop the aural bombardment that was assaulting them from all sides. She now clung on to Mike, her arms encompassing him tightly. Her head now buried deep in his chest as she averted her stare away from the door and the unknown terror seething to get through and reveal itself to them.

"OH GOD MAKE IT STOP!" she cried out loud not knowing whether her prayer would be answered or not and even doubting if it might be heard in the first place!

As if to rescue her failing faith the noise seemed to slow slightly, at first the change was not discernible to them, then at last the change was detectable to their ears. The booming seemed to be disappearing off into the distance or in this case retreating into the darker bowels of the house. Francesca allowed herself a small smile of relief and looked up at Mike.

"I think its gone!" she whispered not daring to let her voice go above that level in case the noise heard her relief and came back to inflict more pain on their souls. Mike didn't reply he wasn't even looking at her. In the dim light from his lighter she could see his scowling face as he glowered angrily at the door , his fists clenched as if he was ready to throw a punch at whatever might dare show itself.
"Its gone Mike! Do you hear me its gone !"she repeated jubilantly. Francesca's words finally filtered through to Mike who turned to her smiling and nodded. Francesca was right! The knocking had wafted away into thin air. It was gone!

But what replaced it was much much worse!

It was Mike who noticed it first while they were both warily watching the door.

He saw a harmless looking fragment float gently to the floor and

paid no attention to it. Another fragment parascended gracefully down in front of him he didn't give it a second thought.

When a third larger fragment dropped past him like a rock his eyes were at last distracted upwards, when he saw what was up there his initial wish was that he had not looked up in the first place!

Even in the near darkness, by holding the lighter aloft it gave him a clear idea of what was happening. Across the ceiling deep fissures had developed, criss-crossing them were smaller cracks that had traversed the ceiling above them from one end to the other. It was as if it had been transformed into some sort of jagged edge jigsaw puzzle. A jigsaw that was on the very edge of falling apart!
Even as he looked in horror he could see the pieces dislodging themselves forcing themselves free from their fellow jagged neighbours who were following suit, what struck Mike was the lack of noise all this commotion was causing! It was as if they had been the unwitting guests at some macabre surprise party where the host was this house and the surprise gift that was to be sprung on them or in this case dropped on their heads was some heavy pieces of skull-smashing masonry!

If the house had wanted to get them out of the room then it had succeeded there was no more time to waste they had to leave NOW!

"Fran look up!" he implored.
Francesca's eyes rose slowly to the drama unfolding above their

heads, her eyes locked on the unhinging puzzle and stared unblinking while they grew in proportion to the fear she felt inside. She opened her mouth and let out an ear-splitting scream. Francesca's scream seemed to be the cue that the ceiling was waiting for and with a shudder of relief let itself go to pieces on top of them.!

As soon as Mike had seen Francesca open her mouth he guessed what was coming and what would certainly follow! Grabbing their still unpacked backpacks in one hand and grasping her by the shoulder he yanked her across the room just as the ceiling collapsed above them. He slammed hard into the door just giving himself time to give the broad wooden latch a hard flick with of the backpacks in his hand, such a hard flick in fact that it flew off the door up towards the ceiling only to be brought crashing down by a lump of brick that smashed it to smithereens when they both hit the floor.

As Mike flung the door open he glanced at the splintered wooden latch and knew that it prophetically told what would happen to them both if they stayed! Without looking back again he pulled both Francesca and himself through the doorway, for the moment they didn't care what might be hiding in the shadows for them. They were concerned about the terrible noise of the ceiling as it totally disintegrated throwing itself down onto the cold stone below.

Fleeing almost blindly along the corridors they tried to put as much distance between that ruined room and themselves. It quickly dawned on Mike that the house was willing to destroy

itself just for the satisfaction of seeing both Francesca and himself killed. It might seem a case of cutting one's nose off just to spite to the face but what did the house care if it destroyed itself -it felt nothing ! It was the malevolent spirit that had possessed the house that felt emotions! If it destroyed this house all it would do was haunt the new house built or move on to another property. Yes Mike could clearly see that it didn't care how much of the house it destroyed just as long as both of them were destroyed along with it!

The lighter's flame was stating to flicker dangerously low and Mike guessed that it would be going out soon plunging them both into blindness! There was no time to slow down, there was only time to speed up! To where they weren't sure! They had no torch , no map, no plan! They were lost in almost every way imaginable!

Downwards , downwards they fled through the corridors where that thing had chased them and which might be getting ready to chase them again! A haunting fear crossed Mike's mind- what if it was already chasing them gliding or bounding effortlessly down the endless maze of halls and rooms? It would obviously know every hiding place in the house! There would be nowhere safe to hide! This house was its hunting ground with Francesca and himself the hunted prey!

Mike strained to hear any sound or noise that might constitute a threat but as far as he could ascertain the only noises shattering the silence in the house now was the sound of two people running for their lives!

"I-gotta-stop! I -can't-go on!" Francesca spluttered out as her body seized up and she came to rest in the corner where the passage turned sharply. Mike stopped without argument and slid down next to her.

He saw no point in protest after all it didn't matter where they were, the house could make cannon fodder of them anytime it wanted to! They were merely rats in a science lab being experimented upon to see how they reacted , how quickly they were able to solve problems, their emotional responses to different stimuli . When the house had finished its tests then it would have no more use for its test subjects and their lives would finish along with the experiment.

"What are we gonna do?" Franseca wailed.

Mike put his hand round her and pulled her closer to help keep them warm. He hadn't noticed the chill in the house for a while because of all the running that they had been doing but he certainly noticed it now! He knew from past experience that whenever he felt cold Francesca would feel absolutely freezing! This would be compounded now by the fact that whenever she felt nervous a common reaction in her was for her to feel cold. Well she was more than nervous at the moment she was completely and utterly terrified!

Mike pulled the violently shivering Francesca even closer to himself cementing the tight bond between them even more, he felt her iceberg hands and heard her chattering teeth. Even through his thick clothing he could feel the cold from her slim frame

reaching out to him hungry for warmth and finding it in him through his body heat.

Francesca looked up at Mike again for some comforting words and support "What are we gonna do now?"
"We'll stay here for a little while till we get our breath back!"
"Then what?"
"Then we keep moving to keep warm and to keep away from whatever's after us!"
"But where are we gonna go exactly?"

Francesca's manner was becoming more and more of that of a little girl that had lost her way . He understood why she felt and was acting this way, given what had just occurred it was only to be expected , but it still didn't stop it from irritating him. It wasn't so much her continuous stream of questions being fired at him which annoyed him. What he found frustrating and up-setting was her curiosity for a plan which he simply did not have! He just wouldn't have the answer to all her questions though he thought that he should have!

He dreaded using the ' I don't know' answer it would at the very least only disappoint Francesca and make him look useless! But the situation demanded complete honesty from each other and just simply 'winging' it with make-believe answers in an attempt to camouflage their dire situation would not help either of them.

Mike looked down at Francesca's helpless doe-like eyes as she repeated "But where are we gonna go exactly?"

Mike took a deep breath and said the words that he hoped he would never have to say to her.
"I don't know Fran! I just don't know!"

Francesca stared at him in disbelief not wanting to believe what he had just said to her, perhaps she had through some freaky way misheard him! Anything was possible especially in this house of nightmares! She gulped.
"I didn't hear you babe!"
"I said I-don't -know!" Mike repeated slowly, extenuating the words excessively.

There was now no doubt in Francesca's mind what he had said . Her whole body felt sickly and numb and if she had had any food in her stomach to throw up she undoubtedly would have. She started to keel forward all hope sucked from her and would have fallen flat on her face if not for Mike's strong hands around her.

"I'm sorry Fran really I am but I've told you all that I can think of doing !" he continued apologetically.

A tide of anger rose in Francesca sweeping away all terror , all tiredness.
"Don't be sorry! Do something! Think of something better! Something else that we can do you gotta!
"For the time being there's nothing else that we can do Fran!" Mike tried to explain.

Already he could feel the hurt, the anger, the disappointment in all the tones that she had used since his admission that he had run out

of ideas of how to stay alive. Her mood was not going to improve.

"We've got to find a safe place to hide!"
"We can't Fran we haven't got a map to show us the layout of the house!"
"Why?"
" Its was left in the other room which caved in behind us . We'll never be able to find it under all that rubble!"
"We could at least try!"
"What? In the darkness not being able too see our own hands in front of our own faces! And all the time knowing that whatever was after us could return and catch us unawares!"

It was Mike's turn to feel angry now, anger at her desperate foolish ideas that would only lead to an early demise. Anger that she seemed only to think of him as a superman, a reliable rock in any emergency. Of course that had been all good and well while he had been able to live up to such an image and he had actually at times believed himself to be just that - a perpetual knight in shining armour! But the situation was different now- her excessive demanding and persistent belief that he knew the answers to everything had been his undoing and the undoing of her view of him. All pretence had now been stripped away from him and he had been revealed as a flawed weak human being-the same as the rest of humanity. He was no longer totally unique in her eyes and his shining armour was now tarnished and dented !

He couldn't help but consider if the situation would have been different if he had shown himself to be indecisive and ineffective on a few previous occasions before coming to this house! If he

had, then perhaps he would have managed to have burst the bubble which held him head and shoulders above other ordinary men in Francesca's eyes! Then perhaps she would not have been so disappointed with him now for not living up to his image when she needed him most!

"Don't worry Fran! You know that I'll always be with you! I'm never gonna desert you-ever!" Mike whispered to her sincerely. Deep inside he hoped that his few words would help recover some of the prestige and respect that he had lost from her.

Francesca snuggled up closer to him and gazed at him with an admiring look in her eyes. It didn't matter if he didn't have all the answers all the time how could she have made such an impossibly unrealistic demand on the man who she loved and who evidently despite everything still loved her!
"Forgive me please Mike I'm sorry!" she asked him humbly.
"There's nothing to forgive !" Mike replied shaking his head.

Mike's lips lingered close to her's as he savoured her sweet breath. Finally his steadily advancing lips touched her's, lightly at first, then again this time passionately Meanwhile all the time their entwined arms pulled them closer to each other. It seemed that eternity and a day could pass them by unnoticed so timeless was their moment together. A moment in which they felt as if they were caught up in their own private fantasy in which no one or nothing could intrude upon!

It was a fantasy that was quickly shattered like a pane of splintered glass when Francesca broke free from her boyfriend's

amorous embrace long enough to glance warily about on both her sides as if expecting to see something swoop down on them, dig its claws into them and snatch them into the darkness.

"What's the matter?" Mike asked concerned , noticing his partner's distraction from their inopportunely timed love-play. He immediately realised how stupid he had made that question sound ! Of course he knew what the matter was -Everything! The only thing going for them was that they had each other!

Mike quickly rephrased the question to try and cover his previous crass and stupid words. "What did you hear Fran?"

Francesca shook her head vigorously as if she was trying to get rid of all her fears and worries from out of her head.
"I'm just bit jumpy!" she explained
"We both are Fran!"
Shifting close to him , she snaked her fingers through his shirt to explore his chest, while allowing his hand to rest lightly on one of her firm breasts which he lovingly caressed softly.

"Mike?" Francesca's voice sounded dream like as it wafted over to him. .

Mike felt lulled into a false sense of security thanks to his lover's erotic advances, he felt almost drunk on the love that he felt for her.
"Yes Fran?"
"I'm so tired! Couldn't we stay here a little while?"
Even in the small amount of light available from Mike's slowly

dying lighter she could see a deep frown instantly spread from one side of his face to another.

"Please just for a little while" she whined in her most child-like voice, knowing full well that any resistance that he had to her request would melt away under her pitiful tone.

At first Mike felt annoyed and manipulated by Francesca for using THAT voice, she knew that it was the best way to get round him and wrap him round her little finger. After a brief angry silence Mike quickly caved -in to her demand.
"OK! But just for a few minutes" he relented reluctantly.
Francesca smiled a broad thank you and leaned her head on his shoulder.

He gazed protectively over Francesca who had fallen asleep without any further encouragement. Like her he also felt the seductive lure of deep slumber beckoning him that would offer the possibility of a temporary escape from this nightmarish reality. But Mike knew better than to succumb to this deep desire as he suspected that with this sleep would come death! Someone had to stay awake in order to keep a look out for any danger. He looked up longingly at a window trying to will the day to come faster!

He still felt the urge to shut his eyes just for the briefest of moments but he knew that that brief moment could be transformed into minutes and then stretched effortlessly into hours. He mulled over the idea of going for the shortest of walks a little way down the corridor just to help keep him awake, he would of course keep a check on Francesca constantly and

wouldn't let her out of his sight....

Francesca woke up startled from her sleep which had been plagued by deadly nightmares and evil entities that were so terrible that her mind had tried to blot them out leaving only fragmented memories of them! Disturbed she turned to Mike for comfort.

But Mike wasn't there!

She looked around horrified at the possibility that she was alone, her tongue felt too numbed by shock to even scream out his name but just in front of her on the floor she saw that Mike had left his lighter with the trigger tied down with a shoelace. Its small fragile flame was all that stood between little hope and no hope.

Francesca finally managed to call out for Mike in a hoarse voice that was scarcely above a whisper but the blackness offered her nothing except emptiness. All of a sudden she heard someone or was it something?

At first she couldn't tell who or what the noise might be. It seemed as if all thinking processes in her brain had shut down leaving only the small part that relied on instinct. But the only message that it blared out to her was of one to run and keep running! It was a message that she would quite gladly have obeyed if her legs had decided to do what her brain was ordering it to but they were following their own rules and had decided to stand frozen to the ground like two thin stone pillars.
All the time the noise edged nearer and nearer, shaking

uncontrollably Francesca tried to lift the lighter to reveal the cause of the sound, but her arm was quaking so much now that the lighter's flame was almost blown out!

The flame started to shred away the mystery of the darkness before it then suddenly illuminated a face a few yards away - Francesca could have cried with relief- it was Mike's face! "Mike!" she shouted at him in an angry tone, anger at being left alone mixed with a tone of love and relief at seeing him again.

Something was wrong!

"Mike?" she was unsure now, unsure of his present state, unsure of what she was going to do and most ominously unsure of what Mike was going to do next!

It wasn't only the fact that he seemed to fail to recognise her and made no greeting towards her. There was also the look on his face a grimace as if his whole body was contorted with pain.

Why was Mike shuffling and not walking normally ?

Though it may have seemed bizarre amidst everything to dwell on such a seemingly minor and unimportant point her mind would not allow her to do so . Unable to stop herself she started to lower the level of the lighter down past his face , past his neck-

She never got lower than his chest.

What she saw when she got to his chest and abdomen wanted to

make her empty her bowels right then and there. Protruding at erratic angles peppered almost murderously in his flesh casually were knives!!! As Mike got nearer so the horror got greater! Someone or something had driven several blades into him, from which blood now showered out like a group of waterfalls.

Francesca realised that his walk was not the walk of someone living but the walk of a dying man !

Mike stretched out his hands for help, but Francesca backed away unable to give the help that she knew he needed. His shuffling slowed as his heart started to give up the valiant fight for survival. The sight of even his Francesca rejecting him , repulsed by his wounds proved too much for him to continue another step towards her.

There was nothing left for him to do but die.

Mike lurched forward like a zombie and fell heavily down onto the stone floor driving the knives deeper into his punctured body, splicing more organs and splintering bone.

Francesca had seen all the horror that she could take and could no longer stifle the scream building up inside of her she took a deep breath and started to scream long and hard.

Francesca woke up screaming as hard as she had in her nightmare. She thanked God silently that it had all been a dream and turned to Mike- Mike was gone!

Perhaps she was still dreaming , perhaps she was going to wake up safe and sound in her own warm bed at home, perhaps right at this moment she was in the car being driven here by Mike, she would wake up any second now and tell him her weird and horrific dream , they would most probably have a big laugh over all of it all the way to the house! Perhaps-

"Fran are you OK?" demanded a breathless Mike who had come running as soon as he had heard her scream. All hopes that this was all a dream collapsed within her.

Mike looked intently at Francesca's face to make sure that she was as well as could be expected given their hopeless circumstances. He was perplexed to see a look of disappointment on her face when she had first seen him , instead of relief ..

"Come on Fran let's keep moving" he told her as he offered her a helping hand .

Francesca obstinately ignored it and stayed put.

"C'mon Fran you know that we've got to keep on moving its our only chance!"
"What chance? We haven't got a chance!"
"You're right! We won't have a chance if you just sit there waiting for it to get us!"
"Its gonna get us anyway wherever we are!"
"Wrong Fran! You're wrong!"
"And what makes you think that you're so right?"
"And what makes you think that I'm so wrong"

"Don't turn the question on its head answer it!"

Mike bit his lip , they had no time for this arguing crap! They had already wasted enough time earlier on in time consuming verbal fencing and they were wasting even more time right now over things that were not up for discussion but instead had already been discussed and decided. Francesca just didn't seem to appreciate the knife-edge situation that they had landed in.. Each second wasted proportionally lessened their odds for getting through the night in one piece!

"We've got no more time to argue! COME ON!" He ordered her as he forcibly dragged her to her feet.
"Where are we going?" she demanded angrily.

Mike let out a long deep sigh.
"We've been through all this before! Anywhere but here! Now are you coming or not?"

Mike turned away and started walking away after having given her his ultimatum which presented her with 2 stark choices either stay put or come with him! He knew of course that she wouldn't opt to stay put on her own in the dark! Sure enough he heard the quick heel clicks of her shoes as she rushed to catch up with him.

While she had been asleep Mike had quickly formulated some sort of advanced plan of action that went beyond simply walking up and down the corridors, when she was level with him he let her know what it was.

"Our first priority is light Fran , my lighter 's almost finished!"
"How are-"Fran started to whine only to be cut off by Mike.
"From candles if not we'll make torches from pieces of clothing wrap them round a piece of wood or something!" he dictated confidently.
"But where?" Fran pestered.
"Use your eyes Fran! There's wood all around and if we keep our eyes peeled we might come across some more candles!" he continued in his authoritative manner . With each moment that passed the more he felt that the situation was coming under control. A situation that was being controlled by himself - a thought that boosted his ego no end!

Although the lighter flame had dwindled to no bigger than that of a lighted match it was still enough for them to give some illumination. and Mike marched along confidently with Fran in tow. Suddenly he slipped on something lost his footing and fell. His confident veneer almost deserted him as he remembered the age old saying "Pride comes before a fall" and cursed himself for trying to behave in such an overconfident manner.

He put his hands on the floor and found something it was long it was thin ! It was a candle! Mike picked it up jubilantly and would have waved it about jubilantly under her 's nose if the lighter's tiny flame hadn't been on the verge of using up the last few drops of fuel contained in it! Grasping the candle stick desperately he swiftly moved it under the rapidly diminishing yellow flame . Quickly he gently manoeuvred the candle so that its wick was exposed to as much of the flame as possible, but the old wick flaky with age stubbornly refused to ignite. Undeterred

Mike tried again, knowing grimly that he had no choice but to try again and again till he succeeded ! Their lives depended on it!

He held the candle even closer to the now almost extinct flame that resembled something more like a spark rather than a full-blooded flame. Then it happened!-It was small! It was weak! But it was there! A tiny flame had managed to take a small foothold on the very end of the candle wick.

Nurturing it as if it was a child Mike put his hand around it to protect it from any unforeseen drafts of wind that might 'mysteriously' make their presence felt. He was rewarded for his diligence when the flame steadily spread downwards along the whole of the wick! Mike proudly held it up high in front of him as if it was some sort of trophy. He glanced over to Francesca to receive the more positive comments that he now expected to hear from her in relation to their present circumstances.

But Francesca had disappeared !

"Fran? Where are you?" he asked the surrounding darkness, not sure in which direction to face while asking his question but whatever way he faced it wouldn't matter -the empty darkness had no answers for him .
"FRAN!" this time he was demanding an answer not merely politely requesting it! He wondered how long he would have to wait before he got a reply.

He didn't have to wait long.

Out of the furthest corner of his eye he thought that he caught a glimpse of something. Something that might be a slight glint of metal! He instinctively started to move to one side, sensing that he was in great danger.

He wasn't wrong!

Like a silver arrow the knife flew downwards towards him straight at his heart! Mike managed to move out of the way quickly, but not quickly enough! Although the silver missile missed its intended target it still landed a hit when it sliced across the top of his shoulder! Mike stood in shock for a second not only stunned by the attack itself but also from the identity of the person he knew had to be behind this sudden and ferocious attack! He prayed that he might be wrong.

He wasn't!

Out of the shadows stepped his would-be killer.

Francesca!

Mike automatically backed away unable to find the necessary words that might protect himself and ward of this fiend that she had become! A sudden pang of pain hit him and he thought that he had been attacked again by another assailant then he realised that it was the initial wound that he had received, the pain-numbing shock that he had experienced had subsided, terror and agony had now taken its place.

Although Francesca was shuffling slowly towards him Mike didn't dare take his eyes of her for a moment in case she suddenly used that as an opportunity to suddenly charge at him! But with the pain from his wound becoming more and more intense he knew that he had no choice but to take a look at the damage done.

Forcing himself to tear his eyes away from the darkness shrouded form of Francesca he stole a quick look at his wound and was immediately thankful it wasn't as serious as the pain suggested, it was only a flesh wound and thanks to his fast reaction the blade had only partially sliced off some skin which now hang dangling from his arm uselessly along which, blood from the knife wound flowed excitedly before dripping off and splashing down to the floor with a steady soft splashing sound.

A sudden sound tore his eyes away from his sliced skin and his mind away from the pain. Looking up ahead of him he saw that something terrible had happened.

Francesca had vanished again!

One small part of him was relieved for a moment -but only for a moment! His common sense told him that at least when she was visible to him he knew when and where she might try to strike. That was now impossible! The darkness had made her invisible enabling her to strike out , then disappear , then strike again, then disappear again. This type of attack was a real possibility and the outcome would be inevitable- his death due to numerous stab wounds and loss of blood.

He had to find her before her knife found him!

Perhaps he could try and reach her- the real Francesca that he knew and loved by talking to her and encouraging her to resist the evil will that the house was trying to impose on her. He had to try to find a way to get pass the evil entity that had stolen her away from him. He had to get her back!

Mike thought he heard the slight shuffle of a pair of lady's shoes and knew that she was somewhere up ahead- for the time being at least! He looked forlornly at the candle and suddenly felt like a complete idiot! The candle looked so pathetically inadequate for the job of lighting his way!- and he had expected gratitude from Francesca for this poor version of an electric torch?

"Fran! Listen to me please!" he begged.
He heard some more shuffling nearby and he realised that she must be preparing for another assault. He very slowly turned around while examining meticulously each direction that he was facing.

"Fran! You've got to fight it not me! I'm Mike! I love you ! Remember?"

The shuffling that he had heard stopped suddenly as if the possessed Fran was mulling over what he had said - weighing it up, seeing if it made sense- trying, really trying to remember.

"I love you Fran and you love me! Remember?"

Mike waited breathlessly not knowing what to expect except to expect the unexpected! Which was exactly what he got when he was distracted from his search for Francesca by a hissing that sounded like steam escaping or MIST! BLACK MIST!!!

He couldn't be sure of course if there was any black mist and especially not even if it was black or not! It was just a hunch but this was the sort of trap that the house would spring on him- have him attacked on all sides by the flesh-eating fog and the flesh - shredding Fran!

Fate at last dealt him a lucky hand and he spied a twin candlestick holder in a corner with 2 thick candles in it! After rushing over and lighting each one in quick succession he continued with a new air of confidence with his new improved torch lighting which lit up the way brightly.

He tried to pinpoint the location and movement of the return of this old silent foe. It was no good of course the fog if there was any blended seamlessly with the surrounding pressing gloom. He put the candlestick holder down and surveyed the immediate illuminated vicinity

All of a sudden he thought he saw something glinting in the dark on the edge of his lighted area or was it just his imagination?

It wasn't!

Before he could do any thing to prevent it , he felt himself flying

to the floor having just been hit by an invisible force that had the strength of a hurricane. He lay there stunned for only a second - that was all the time he had before Fran was on top of him another knife in her hand with only Mike's wounded arm stopping it from plunging into his heart!

At the moment he was being successful in keeping it at arm's length. but he wasn't sure how long he could keep it up for. Fran's body seemed to have been empowered with the strength of 10 grown men. He swung his other hand over so that it could be used to give some support to his ailing and rapidly failing arm as it started to buckle under the immense pressure being put under it from Fran's superhuman strength.

The knife was 20 inches away.

In sheer frustration at not having killed him yet Fran started to kick Mike viciously with her hard-wearing leather shoes.

Only 15 inches away.

Angrily she bit his hand and wouldn't let go , the knife slipped down closer to him.

Just 10 inches away.

In a fit of utter impatient rage she scratched at his face.

5 inches away and getting closer all the time.

She gouged at his face even harder making him scream out in pain.

3 inches - 2 inches.

Francesca made a downward thrust putting all her weight into it in order to bring the knife down into Mike's chest.

1 inch.

The knife's blade pierced his chest!

Mike felt strangely giddy and heady as he felt the warm trickle of blood snake its way down across his chest
as Francesca pushed the knife even harder through his skin till it was a hairbreadth away from his heart.
Mike could now hear the beats of his heart so loudly that they almost exploded his eardrums.

Sensing victory the possessed Fransesca eased the pressure knowing that brute strength was no longer required.

It was the moment that Mike had been waiting for!

Using all of what remained of his strength he did what he had been unable to do before and taking her by surprise rolled over to his side pushing her hard with both his hands which sent her flying through the air ,the knife still tightly gripped in her hand. Unable to control the amount of force that had been unleashed on her Francesca rolled stiffly across the floor banging her head on

the floor.

Staggering to his feet with his hand clasped over his knife wound Mike groped his way through the semi-darkness to see how bad Francesca's bang on the head was. He knew that if she was knocked unconscious then it might be for the best, at least that could prevent the evil presence from using her like a puppet against him for a while.

Falling down heavily next to her and by using his free hand he flipped her over gingerly, half expecting her to resume her attack on him. Relief swept through him as he saw her unconscious face the entity would be unable to make any more use of her and would hopefully leave her alone - at least for the time being!.

What struck him first and foremost of her physical appearance was her pasty white face that looked that it had been drained of all blood and looked almost lifeless.

Mike got up to move to a better position so that he could lift her up when he suddenly slipped on something and crashed to the floor . Angry he tried to push himself up and inadvertedly put his hands in what he had slipped on-it was blood .

-and it wasn't his own!

It was Francesca's blood!

With his hands trembling in terror and his mind aflame with anguish Mike forced himself to look at Francesca's body.

He didn't have to look long to find what he was looking for.

There where her once wonderful loving heart resided, a knife also resided both united together physically and both lifeless, the knife and Francesca's heart.

Francesca was dead.

But an equally dreadful realisation came to him in that instant.

Francesca was dead and he had killed her.

Mike let out a long almost inhuman cry of pain and shame as he bent over the lifeless body of his beautiful Francesca. Time passed unnoticed to Mike as he began a lonely vigil by her.
"I'm sorry Fran!" He mumbled weakly
"Forgive me please forgive me Fran!" he continued tearfully, seeking words of forgiveness from a mouth that could no longer speak.

Out of the darkness he could smell the foulness of the black mist as it started to close in around him from all sides He tried to get up but his chest wound wouldn't let him. It didn't matter now anyway. He wanted to stay where he was till he died much better perhaps a quick death now than a lifetime of guilt and sorrow.

Mike closed his eyes and waited for the mist to erode his flesh and bones into ashes.

Then out of the blackness , out of the hopelessness that seeped in from all sides came something that grasped him on his arm and would not let go! Mike recoiled in shock and tried to free himself from this thing which possessed a grasp of cold steel.

He thought that it might be a hand and maybe it was but there was no way to tell since it was camouflaged by the darkness. and the matching mist. All he knew was that no matter how much he writhed or pushed the force pulling him was stubborn and refused to let him go! He shouted forlornly for help though there was no other mortal to hear him never mind help him!

Relentlessly he continued to be dragged against his will, he was almost shocked by his will to live, a few moments ago he had been ready to die now he just wanted to live- more than ever! He searched for something to hold onto to slow his own journey into the unknown -but there was nothing.-nothing at all.

As Mike made his last ditch efforts to save himself from his unknown fate and failed he gave up his fight against fate and fell back on the floor giving free reign for the force in question to take him wherever it wanted. He looked back to try and a get a last glimpse of his Francesca but her body was already surrounded by mist dissolving her bones and flesh sending an ever ascending stench of reeking decay smell that filled up his nostrils his stomach, even his lungs.
Although mentally and physically drained he had to try and find out what was going to happen to him!
"WHAT DO YER WANT ?"
"WHO ARE YER?"

"WHERE ARE YER FROM?"

It didn't matter what he shouted all he received was silence , he briefly toyed with the idea that perhaps the entity was trying to speak to him on a different frequency level which was above ordinary human aural level or perhaps it was trying to communicate with him telepathically . Although it was hard given the present circumstances he tried to clear his mind to receive the messages that he thought it might be trying to broadcast to him - he received no words, no images, no feelings- nothing at all .

He knew that struggling was a waste of his limited energy and resigned himself to go wherever he was being pulled. It didn't seem intent on harming him YET! If anything it seemed to have found a way round the lethal mist and actually seemed to be saving his life! Immediately guilt and grieving came pouring down in his mind as he thought of Francesca who he had unwittily killed and whose body now lay cold and still and rapidly putrefying not far away. He wailed out her name in despair hoping for forgiveness and comfort that she was no longer able to give.

He closed his eyes and hoped that he would join her soon. Forever.

Mike had lost track of his bearings and where he was being taken , but for a moment due to a shaft of moonlight he glimpsed his surroundings and saw to see to his dismay that he had no idea which part of the house he was actually in and if even if he was still in the house at all! He could see that the white stone walls had

now been encased with a layer dirt and that he was slithering over a floor which now had a carpet of mud laid over it.

It was then that the images started to flash through his mind. They weren't clear at first and even when their clarity improved , the meaning and events taking place within them were not easily interpreted. In the initial images he caught the sight of thin small hands clawing at dirt., splintered finger nails , blood mixed with black mud .

Slowly but surely the images soon had sound interwoven with the frantic motions occurring in them. He could hear flustered light breathing like someone trying to catch their breath but unable to! In the background of this tortured laboured breathing Mike thought that he heard a persistent scratching- not a mild or low pitched but persistent , deep sounding as if it was claws that were making this noise rather than just human fingernails! He didn't know how he knew this but it was definitely not being made by a human! This background scratching sounded too savage, too base to have originated from any ordinary person. But as for the identity of the being or beings which were making any of these noises well that was a mystery that he knew would be solved for him -if he lived long enough to receive the answer!

Gradually emotion started to merge into the still photo-like pictures that flashed on and off before his mind's eye. Once more they were a plethora of feelings all mixed in together in various quantities all constantly changing. They spelt one emotion to him- CONFUSION!

At one point he got the feeling of the height of exhilaration followed by the utter depths of horror. Oscillating between these two extremes, various emotions swept over him as a passing wind storm does over a desert. Feelings of wonder, desperation , despair and happiness followed in quick succession , but although they were clear within themselves, as a whole they still failed to make complete sense to what the images might be trying to convey to him. His mind started to grow more and more tired as he was towed without resistance along this river of slime and the images started to fade away from him.

He had for a while now felt somehow secure enough to keep his eyes closed which helped him receive the mental messages with greater ease than when his eyes were open and exposed to external stimuli which just tended to cloud the pictures that were being transmitted to him. But with the pictures increasingly vague , distorted and out- of - focus together with his fatigue he could no longer concentrate on anything except on his own survival! He decided to open his eyes a crack and saw that he seemed to be in some sort of tunnel not much larger than himself . He could still feel the rigid grasp of the invisible force which had him in its grip and wondered whether or not he should open his eyes completely wide in order to find out where he was , but there was a less brave part to himself that still considered ignorance to be bliss and that there were times when the unknown should remain unknown! Perhaps this was one of those times! In the end his need to see his surroundings in as much detail of possible overrided any cowardice he had. Anyway he doubted whether it could be as bad as he imagined. Mustering all of his courage he forced his eyes wide open.

Mike was right it wasn't as bad as he had imagined.- It was much, much worse!
It would have been better if his whole surroundings had continued to be mercifully bathed in darkness , but this had now lifted to be replaced with a dim light whose source Mike could not trace. Mike looked down to look at his own mud soaked garments but they weren't dark brown they were red.

Red with blood.

If that had been the worse of it then he might have been able to contain his horror but their was more to follow! Shocked into silence he looked at the river of blood that he was being pulled along and saw that it was some sort of sickening macabre human stew with various body parts bobbing up and down - A skull with part of its scalp still intact, a large intestine with a decayed stomach still connected, a heart with its arteries still connected to a deflated lung and a brain sliced in 2 with a rotting eyeball precariously attached to it!

Mike could see other mutilated monstrosities floating towards him but his eyes couldn't take anymore and he clamped his eyelids down protectively over his eyes, while simultaneously letting out a loud cry of disbelief and horror.

Despite all that was going on around him , he was able to hold onto the grateful thought that at least he hadn't eaten for a number of hours. He was sure that if he had then whatever he had eaten he would either have puked it up or crapped it out which would

only have added to the mess of human remains that he was semi-floating along at the moment!

He no longer saw this force that had captured him as trying to save him, merely as having replaced a quick messy death with a longer messier one! The act of being forcibly dragged along this tunnel was itself an act of torture and a form of death, the slow death of his mental sanity . Never in his worse nightmares could he ever have imagined or wanted to imagine the horror that he was now a part of. If his worse fears were confirmed then he might well become a permanent feature of this ghastly parade of human body memorabilia. He tried to tell himself that things couldn't get worse.

But they could and they did.

Mike suddenly felt the stream of blood and guts that he was drifting helplessly down deepen and give way from underneath him! He no longer had the luxury of having most of his body above water (if water was the right word to describe the human slime surrounding him!). Instead he found himself not merely starting to submerge but even worse felt himself being DRAGGED DOWN as if his invisible captor meant for him to be drowned in this spare body part soup!

Fighting desperately he thrashed about like a fish out of water hoping that he might be able to fulfil the seemingly impossible ambition of just being able to keep his head above all the blood and gore that swam so happily around him on the surface!

Unfortunately it was an ambition that he was not going to succeed in, when he was suddenly and murderously pulled under to see the bitter harvest of human souls that lay below- it was a sight that Mike would not have wished on his worse enemy! He had instinctively anticipated the moment that he might had gone under and had taken 3 deep breaths in preparation, they were the only things that stood between him and drowning.

As soon as he was pulled under he noticed how much more diluted the blood seemed to be. At first he thought it was a small blessing then he realised what a curse it was! It meant that he could see more clearly! It meant that he could see EVERYTHING much more clearly!

Around him were ruined swaying statues but these were not made of stone or metal they were made of human flesh somehow partially preserved under this river of gore. Some had their heads missing ,some had had their upper torsos sheared away other had arms and legs missing, but all of them were rooted to the bottom of this muddy bloody river bed!

Most seemed to be adults their sex unrecognisable long ago since their chests and genitals had been gnawed away by what ever corrosive bodily enzymes they might have contained in them, but even worse was still to come! Some of the statues were too small to ever have been adults! Innocent children had also been the victims of this evil!

Mike strained for the surface as the currents and the force holding him tried to harangue him into going deeper. It was as if the

multitude below were lonely and needed his company, their arms swaying upwards in an attempt to catch him and hold onto him till he had became one of their number. Mike wasn't ready to accept such an invitation yet and strained even harder for the surface ! His breath was almost spent , his lungs were almost bursting but he felt that he was starting to win ! Against all the odds he was getting closer and closer to the surface! He could almost smell the glorious air that lay above it! Full of the stench of rotting corpses it might be but nonetheless it was air. Air that would save his life!- If he managed to reach it!
But the river had one more secret to reveal to him before it let him go! A secret that it knew could destroy his will to escape and make him want to stay forever in its flesh filled raging torrents. As one might casually flip a coin so the river casually flipped Mike to make him come face to face with what it had to offer.

Mike blinked in disbelief at what he saw!

He blinked again unable to believe his eyes, NOT wanting to believe his eyes.

NADIA!

He didn't think of the how and why, or the buts, in short he divorced himself from the impossibility of it all, and chose to believe without question and with no doubt to cloud his mind that it was the long lost love of his life. His childhood sweetheart with her arms outstretched begging for an embrace a kiss. But this was no longer the child he had kissed him as a child. This was a Nadia 15 years later the same age as himself. The years had not spoiled

her beauty and had only enhanced by giving her the beautiful figure of a woman while maintaining the pretty face of the child she once was!

In a split second a million jigsaw pieces fell into place. Somehow the force that had taken her had preserved her had kept her alive it too had fallen in love with her ethereal beauty and despite it being what it was had been unable to destroy it so had kept her alive and now wanted to make her happy by reuniting her with the one true love of her life, she had been the one sending the images to him, she had been the one who had pulled him from the mouth of death.

Mike moved forward to what he knew would be a kiss that could spell his death, yet he knew that his love Nadia would not have enticed him to her for him to be destroyed! The river had kept her alive and now it would keep him alive somehow it would. They would be together forever just as they should always have been!

He stopped fighting the currents and felt himself being drawn to her almost magnetically, her welcoming arms wide open., her dark eyes as mysterious as ever. Her pouting ,sensuous lips ready to receive a kiss that she had waited so long for.

They came together in perfect harmony a few feet from the surface and embraced, Mike gently because of his lack of breath. But Nadia's embrace was strong, forceful so forceful that it started to squeeze out the last tiny amount of air left in his lungs.

Mike turned to face his love for a kiss he hoped would last for an

eternity but what he came face to face with was a decaying half rotten face smiling grimly at him and which might have been laughing at him ,yes definitely laughing at him in that wicked laugh that had been instantly recognisable as Nadia's!

Mike would have screamed if he had any breath left but all he had in his lungs was only water now. His brain living off the last few seconds of oxygen it contained felt Nadia's skeletorial arms that were half covered in maggot infested flesh wrap firmly around him as she dragged them both down into the murky pit below...

JUST ONE NIGHT

"Just one night?" Joe repeated for the umpteenth time "Are sure that 's what it says "Just one night?"
"Of course I'm not sure . I mean I can't read properly can I?" Crystal replied sarcastically flinging the piece of paper over to him.

Joe snatched it hungrily out of the air as it glided towards him. He read and reread the wording on the photocopy that he held in his hand. But this wasn't any old sort of worthless piece of paper this was worth a cool million dollars- it was a sum of money that he had lusted after all his life. For the piece of paper in his hand was no other than the photocopy of the will of his billionaire Grandfather - Mr Thomas A. Haller- the internationally renowned oil tycoon!

Joe had always played up to the role of the dutiful grandson in the hope of ingratiating himself into the old man's good books. As far as he was concerned he had put on a good show for all concerned as he had always shown respect and always been obedient to his Grandfather's wishes.

It hadn't been an easy show to put on either! Especially since his own Dad had fallen out with his Tycoon father years ago and hadn't spoken since! Therefore Joe had fashioned his image to mirror that of his Grandfather-to become the son that his dad

should have become and to become the son his Grandfather would have wished for but which he never got!

His own father had seen what he was doing and warned Joe, warned him not to make himself in the image of a person who was domineering and stifling ,and he had cautioned him sternly not to treat the tycoon as he was an idol to be worshipped.

"He'll see right through what you're doing Joe" his Dad had told him bluntly "He's no old doddering fool! Nothing comes easy in this life! He'll make you jump through burning hoops before he gives you a dime. He hates me! He always has since I turned my back on his lifestyle, his money -grabbing , money worshipping lifestyle! He's always wanted to get back at me ! Destroy me ! He would love nothing better than to turn you against me! He lives for that day!" his Dad and blurted out in a tirade of abuse directed at his own Father.

Well the old man might have lived to see that day but he had died without the satisfaction of seeing that day come to pass when Joe had fallen irrefutably out with his Dad. If anything their bond was stronger than ever, each respecting the other's beliefs and wishes something which seemed to have been completely absent between his Dad's and his Grandfather's father-son relationship.

The depth of hatred between the two was such that Joe's Dad who had been originally called Thomas A. Haller Junior had even changed his name completely in order to try and remove all connection between them. His Father had threatened to cut him off if he didn't change it back! But Joe's Dad had developed a

stubborn streak just like his Father and both refused to give into the other so in the end he had been forced out of the family home and cut off from all financial assistance. Joe's Dad couldn't have been happier and leapt at the chance for independence , grabbing it with both hands!

Over the years a rift had continued to grow between them. That rift had grown into a canyon , unbridgeable by any means. It seemed that this canyon just got wider and wider with each passing year. Joe saw it as so sad that such a sorry state of affairs had been allowed to develop, he also saw that maybe the relationship that he was trying to forge with his Grandfather might act as a bridge that would allow his Dad and Grandfather to become reconciled, forgive each other and have the sort of father-son relationship that they should have had years ago.

Joe imagined their rift must have hurt them both equally hard and deeply but neither could find the courage to admit that to the other , their hurt feelings had festered into open scabby sores that they would pick regularly so that they would always be remembered. and not healed by time. They must have regretted their actions bitterly.

He had seen a hint of how deep that regret was when they had received the telegram which had told them of his Grandfather's sudden death. His Dad had looked ashen-faced with shame and regret written in his eyes after reading that fateful piece of paper. Without saying what the telegram was all about he had silently handed it to Joe's mother then said that he had to be on his own for a while. Joe's mother had followed him upstairs to talk to him but

he hadn't wanted to speak to her and had locked the bedroom door. He hadn't even wanted her to see him crying, for due to his harsh upbringing he was still unable to trust anyone with showing the weaker side of himself for fear of risking disappointment, rejection or worse still, both.

His Grandfather had requested a very private funeral with no mourners, he was to be cremated and his ashes scattered in the wind. Although it hurt Joe's Dad that he was unable to pay his last respects he said no word of complaint or regret- he didn't need to, it was all too clear in his voice and in his actions for everyone who knew him to notice. It struck Joe as ironic that these last respects that his Dad would have liked to have paid would also have been the first respects that he would have paid in a long, long time.

When a copy of the will had arrived Joe's Dad was not been mentioned in it. In a way this wasn't surprising and maybe it even spared his Dad feelings of more guilt and shame as well as making him feel that he had the right to go on hating and despising his Father due to the fact that he had shown no remorse for the way that he had acted towards his own son.

Joe had moved out by then and had moved in with his girlfriend Crystal. That particular morning a large envelope came through their door addressed to Joe who was still sleeping off a hang-over. Even though it was marked PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL as well as URGENT Crystal had opened it anyway, Joe didn't mind - they had no secrets between them and often opened each other's mail.

She had woken him not believing what she had just read and they had both read it again and again in disbelief but each time there was only one way to interpret it as the agreement set out in it was as simple as the plain black bold letters that it had been printed in. It merely stated that:-

THE ESTATE OF THE LATE MR THOMAS HALLER PROMISES TO PAY MR JOE HALLER THE SUM OF $4,000,000 IF HE SPENDS A NIGHT AT ONE OF HIS OILFIELDS WITHOUT FOOD, HEATING OR A TENT.

It was just like Grandfather to give him this sort of test to see if he had any backbone in him. Joe had gone camping on numerous occasions but had never been offered $4 million just to camp out with no food, heating or tent! All of his Grandfather's oilfields were in Texas and Joe pictured himself sleeping out under the stars in the warm night air, he was sure that he could do without food for one night only, especially as he was going to spend most of the time asleep!

Then he saw what he had been dreading. At the bottom of the page were the words :
AGREEMENT SUBJECT TO CONDITIONS (SEE OVER):-

Joe felt his tongue stick in his throat as he realised that this wasn't going to be as simple or as straightforward as he thought. As he turned the sheet of paper over he could sense that there was going to be a huge catch.

He was pleasantly surprised , there was no bog catch! In fact all the conditions seemed reasonable and totally acceptable. They contained various things like the fact that he would be blindfolded until he got to the oilfield, the oilfield had already been chosen for him, rudimentary things that he would expect any diligent lawyer to include in any contract especially one of this magnitude and worth.

"Looks fair and above board!" Joe remarked as he handed it back to Crystal for her to peruse.

Crystal took it back handling it with care as if the paper itself was worth a $4,000,000 rather than the prize it spoke of , but she still had a doubtful expression on her face.
"Mmmm"
"Well?"
"Uh Huh"
"Come on Crystal! Stop fooling about!" pleaded Joe. "What do you think of it eh?"
"I think!" she paused solemnly letting Joe wait with his heart in his mouth while simultaneously hanging onto every word she said.
"I think that YOU'RE GONNA BE A MULTI-MILLIONAIRE !" she cried out excited while jumping up and down like a child.
"WE'RE GONNA BE MILLIONAIRES" Joe corrected her also shouting at the top of his voice interspersing his excited hollowing with whoops of delight.

That night they both got well and truly drunk- an advance celebration of their new found wealth!

The next day he contacted the Haller estate to arrange details about what preparations he had to make . He was told that a car would pick him up that evening and that the only thing that he would have to bring was just himself!

That evening Joe waited impatiently outside , with Crystal by his side. As they both breathed the cool evening air Joe glanced casually at her and noticed a worried look on her face .

What's the matter honey? he asked deeply concerned.
"Oh its nothing" she replied , but Joe could tell that she was hiding something! What it was exactly he wasn't sure. But he could see the insincerity in those eyes. Crystal was training to be an attorney and Joe had often joked that she would make a lousy lawyer because she was such a lousy liar!
"Come on Crystal you're hiding something!" he cajoled her further.
"Its just that" she sighed and began again "Its just too damn easy , there's something strange about it. I can't put my finger on it exactly but there's something not quite right about it all!"
"You got that right Crystal!" agreed Joe. "I should be given the money straight away instead of being asked to camp in an oilfield!" he retorted jokily.

Crystal smiled and started to perk up a bit , then out of the setting sun the car arrived.

Both of them almost gasped in amazement when it pulled up beside them ,this wasn't just any old car !It was an elegant stretch

limo with tinted glass!
"Nothing but the best eh! " Joe remarked to Crystal as a driver got out to open the passenger door for him.
"Looks like they're treating you as if you're a millionaire already!"
"Yeah get use to it baby I'm gonna get a fleet of these when I get back!"
They both smiled then passionately kissed each other goodbye.

Joe quickly got into the limousine and waved excitedly to Crystal as he was driven off into the distance. Crystal waved back equally enthusiastically but her worried look had returned as she anxiously watched him being driven off into the sunset. It looked like the happy ending of some story but she had a bad foreboding about how this story was going to end.

In the limo Joe found a selection of drinks on offer. It was the sort of offer that Joe wasn't ever able to resist whenever that sort of rare opportunity presented itself and he greedily poured himself a generous measure of whisky .
"Cheers Pal .Sorry I can't offer you one" he said loudly to the chauffeur through the glass dividing them.

The Chauffeur nodded smiling in recognition of Joe's stab at humour.

Joe gulped down the whole lot in one gulp and looked at his drained glass satisfied.
He fancied a few more glasses of that good stuff before he got to the mystery oilfield, it would at least keep him warm in case it got a touch chilly but that would be hardly likely- not in Texas.

He stretched out his hand to grab the bottle -and missed ! Everything around him turned double and was fading from his sight fast. But that was surely impossible he had only had one glassful of whisky! How? As he slipped to the floor the answer came back loud and clear -THE WHISKY HAD BEEN DRUGGED!

Joe woke up feeling cold, freezing cold! He opened his eyes to find himself in a sea of ice which stretched in all directions as far as the eye could see!

This was NOT Texas!

"What the hell?" he exclaimed in utter disbelief as he slipped his hand inside the thin summer jacket that he was still wearing. His fingers closed round something and pulled it out. It was a personal dictation machine! Not knowing what else to do with it he pressed the play button. A voice of a ghost came back at him almost immediately-a voice that sent a shiver down his spine and for a moment made him feel colder than the ice surrounding him-It was the voice of his Grandfather!

"Hello Joe! By the time you hear this I'll be dead. No doubt if you are listening to this then you would have taken up my offer which I made you in my last will and testament. You are no doubt wondering what you are doing here. Let me explain You are in Antarctica on one of the places where my geologists had told me that there are deposits of oil beneath the pack ice unfortunately my directors have instructions that this site is not to be exploited for

another year after my death! No doubt you will be expected someone to pick you up in the morning but look at the sky Joe then look at your watch-"

Joe did this and gasped in terror.

As if anticipating his terror the disembodied voice droned on with a tone of relish in its voice . "That's right Joe its about 9am in the morning but its still dark-that's because it remains dark in Antarctica for 6 months of the year. When the night fades and the sun appears then someone will come to take you home to your multi-million fortune . Or more than likely come and search for your dead frozen emaciated body and bring it home to your lovely Crystal!"

"WHY YOU BASTARD? WHY?" Joe bellowed into the small dictation machine as if some how his Grandfather's spirit still lived on in its electronic circuitry.

Once more correctly anticipating his Grandson's response he answered. "The reason for all this is revenge pure and simple. I'm going to punish your father! After his mother died giving birth to him I slaved night and day to give him everything and he threw it all back in my face! He loves you so if you die it will hurt him for the rest of his life!
Joe dropped to his knees his eyes filled with shock and despair from the twisted philosophy that he was hearing. There was just one more question that burned in his mind, as usual his Grandfather had an answer.

"I know that you really hate and despise me! I saw it in your eyes everyday that I saw you! You only pretended to like me for my money!"

Mad insane laughter filled the frosty air around him till Joe could take no more and flung the machine onto the hardened ice where he then proceeded to stamp the life out of it till its innards poured out onto the snow in the form of small pieces of diodes and transistors.

Joe looked up at the blacked out sky and hoped that he would also soon black out.

It would at least make his inevitable death less painful.

ONE NIGHT IN HELL

The sky stormed furiously through the heavens hurling lightening strikes from out of its belly silhouetting a solitary standing figure.

From time to time the lightning dared to reveal portions of the mysterious figure that was surveying its domain eagerly. In its mind its own sinister voice echoed the words which summed up its essence and its own sinister purpose.

'I am always beside you . I am always behind you. I am always inside of you. I am death!'

A sleek glistening lightening strike confirmed these last few words as fact as it illuminated its scythe thirsty for blood and hungry for flesh. Down below it browsed deceptively casually in its quest to pick out some area to walk, and where it walked , horror and mayhem followed close behind.
A large stretch of dense wood caught its all seeing hollow-eye sockets and it knew without a doubt that was the place that it had to be. It could smell in the murky air encasing the tree tops, the fresh smell of mortal human souls.
Mortal human souls that were ripe for harvest.

Rob stared in disgust as the rapidly fleeing sun beckoned in the darkness, he and his girlfriend Sue along with their friend Tom and his girlfriend Ros had been trudging round in this seemingly

god-forsaken wilderness for the best part of the day , searching vainly for the main campsite . It looked like the night was going to end their search prematurely and stop it dead in its tracks till morning.
He stared furiously at his Rolex given to him by Sue to mark their 2nd anniversary of them meeting and going out together for TWO WHOLE YEARS!! Rob contemplated bemused, that this had to be some sort of record for him! In the past his relationship with girls had been short hot passionate encounters usually not lasting past the 30 day mark but Sue had been different, with her there hadn't been the usual case of him falling head over heels in love instead he had been drawn gradually more and more into her beguiling beauty, and then one day had suddenly realised that this was the woman that he could happily spend every day of his life with. Well everyday that is except today !
It was Sue who had the map!
It was Sue who had got them lost!
"Where the hell are we?" Rob rounded angrily on a befuddled and frustrated Sue.
Sue continued to scrutinise the crumpled earth-stained map for a few more seconds before replying diminutively. "Uh-I think..."she began.
Rob moved closer to her and sensing her dismay at his tone of voice put his hand reassuringly on her petitly framed shoulder while peering over her shoulder to see if he could decipher the mass jumble of lines and words that Sue was hopelessly attempting to navigate.
"Where do you think we are babe?" he spoke softly to her.
"Can't you see I'm looking!" snapped Sue unexpectantly.
"You sure that you've got that map round the right way!" Ros

chirped in mockingly, her bright blonde hair flapping uselessly in the air like her mouth.
Unable to stop himself from joining the melee Tom was next to give his opinion. "Never mind the right way I bet she hasn't even got it on the right damn side you know how scientists say that women and map reading don't mix!"
Now it was Ros's turn to get flustered and angry.
"That's a truckload of crap and you know it!" she retorted disgusted, while digging him hard in the ribs. Tom ever the clown winced comically pretending to be hurt while all the time secretly smiling to himself.
Although Rob liked Tom he also hated him from time to time , this was one of those times, he didn't care too much for the love of his life being mocked so blatantly and stupidly!
Rob swung round his eyes filled to the brim with anger
 "Shut up and give her a chance Tom!" he snapped.
Tom knew that look of Rob's all too well , usually it meant that someone was in danger of getting hurt. He took the hint and forced his mouth shut.
Rob turned back to Sue squeezing her shoulder slightly as a show of love and support.
"Any idea where we might me hon?" he ventured tentatively.
"Well we were here about an hour ago!" she replied trying valiantly to sound confident and failing miserably!
" Sure that wasn't hour and a half ago?" Tom chimed in again, he had been consuming low alcohol content cider for most of the day, low alcohol it may have been but alcohol it was never the less. The effects of which were now starting to manifest themselves in his newly found dutch courage.
Rob shot Tom a glare that could have frozen hell over.

"You really need to give your mouth a rest its been working over time lately!"
He once again turned his attention back to Sue.
"Well that should put us about here somewhere in this area" She guessed making a large circle with her finger on the map.
"Can't you be any more exact babe? We've should have reached the main camp by now!" Rob sighed despairingly.
"I know! I know! I know! Will you just get the hell of my back?" Sue wasn't in the habit of such sudden outbursts, and always prided herself on her meditation sessions which she saw as a protective measure against anger and stress. That didn't matter now, no number of lessons could have corked in the explosion of rage and frustration building up inside of her!
Rob moved back defensively exclaiming "I'm off it babe !I'm off it! Now calm down and take it easy. Let's take a compass reading and see what that tells us."
"That's only gonna tell us what the map tells us- that we're lost!" Ros concluded despondently, unable to resist keeping out of the discussion that was quickly decaying into an argument.
"Women map readers-just like women drivers bound to land you in the crap sooner or later" Tom blurted out.
"Hey I told you CAN IT! Things won't get better with you mouthing off big time!" Rob replied jabbing his finger at Tom as if it were a knife.
But Tom's drunkard mood did not feel like making him give in to any threats or attempts at intimidation no matter who it came from.
"Maybe not but it will sure as hell make me feel a whole lot damn well better!" Tom fought back defiantly.
Rob shook his head sadly while shrugging his shoulders. He

couldn't see the point in arguing with Tom while he was in this blind senseless state.

"Ignore him babe!" Rob continued again, getting angry would serve no purpose except to waste time and energy, something that he for one did not have much left. "What does the compass tell us Sue?"
"That we're in crap creek according to this! Its all over the goddamn place. This is crazy. Look !"
Rob peered closely at the compass , sure enough the needle seemed to be doing its own mad version of a helter-skelter.
"Are we off course or what?" he demanded , unable to take his eyes of the needle for a moment.
"According to this damn thing we could be on a different planet and it wouldn't know about it!"
"Ah great in other words we're in crap" Ros added.
"Damn deep crap!" Tom complained loudly.
"Well instead of whining about it Tom! Damn well do something about it!" Rob raged back. He had by now regretted bringing Tom and Ros with them on this trip. Hell! He was now starting to regret coming on the damn trip himself !
"Did any of you see any large landmarks , buildings , anything that we can set our bearings by?" He pleaded desperately to the others..
His plea was answered with a gormless silence.
"Nothing?" he exclaimed in disbelief. "You lot saw nothing!" he reiterated his voice filled equally with disgust and hopelessness.

Sue felt tears of frustration welling up in her eyes as she tried vainly to make head or tail of the map and make sense of the

insane compass , the situation wasn't being helped by the fact that everyone seemed upset with her -even Rob! She felt isolated and alone and wished that she could go back in time by just 10 hours when she had leapt so stupidly at the job of map reading- a 1 week course that she had done in orienteering and map reading had bolstered her with a false sense of confidence that had made her believe that she could handle this responsibility. As it so turned out she had gotten confused over their bearings after only a few hours! Since then it had been an up hill struggle with her leading the others here there and seemingly every damn where! It was her own fault though everything was always her fault! She should have realised that since doing the course which she did when she was in the girl-guides, map layouts would have changed, and in any case her course had only prepared her for a simple to read map not the complicated montrosity that she held before her! Things might have been different if she had actually remembered what she had been taught, but her rusty memory had failed her in her hour of need and she was unable to remember several key points in her course that might have helped. Oh how she wish that there was a hole that she could crawl into and forget about the present mess, and in turn be forgotten about!

Sue could no longer hold her tears back that had been on the verge of breaking through the dam that her mental willpower had created. Suddenly she felt a familiar touch on her shoulder that she loved so much and needed so much now more than ever.

"Don't worry babe it'll be alright!" Rob cooed soothingly to her.
"I'm sorry this is all my fault Rob ! I feel so stupid!" she protested feebly.

"Don't worry babe it WILL be alright!"
But Tom couldn't resist the temptation to spoil even this tender moment between them.
"You know that's the first thing she's said today that hasn't been crap!"
"Look! I'm sorry alright" she fought back weakly.
"Now that is crap!" Tom forged on relentlessly.
"No matter how sorry you are it ain't gonna help us get out us out off this mess that you put us in!" Ros joined in yet again.
"HEY DROP IT! BOTH OF YOU!" Rob warned threatening his eyes flashing angrily.
"Drop it your damn self!" Tom bombarded back , not caring for his friend's show of machismo. "I'm talking the damn truth and you know it! Because of her!-"
He shot an accusing glance in Sue's direction which she could not return. " I'm gonna have to sleep in some cold draughty tent tonight freezing my nuts off!"
"You sure you got any to freeze off!" Sue blurted out finding at last an opportunity to stand her ground and vent her frustrated anger.
Rob had had enough! He had more than enough to deal with without having this crap on his plate to sort out! He wasted no time and coming between them with both hands raised like a boxing ring master splitting up 2 heavy weight fighters bellowed out.
"Cool it both of you! We ain't got time for this crap!" He felt a lot better having got that out his system , like the others he was cold , angry and tired but he still managed to continue in a much calmer manner.
"It doesn't matter whose to blame we won't help ourselves by

blaming each other!"
The others momentarily stunned by his initial loud outburst listened receptively like muted lambs. He seemed to be getting through to them! Perhaps now they could start acting and working together like a team. He was wrong!
"Why don't you damn well cool it! I've had enough of you bossing me around like I'm some sort of stupid little school kid." lurched in Tom shattering Rob's illusion of progress.
Rob threw up in his arms in exasperation! He had had enough and could take no more! If Tom wanted to be his own boss them let him be his own boss. He had had enough of this leadership crap!
"If you want to take over as the person in charge of this trip. Go ahead!" he sounded off while gesturing his arms wildly. "You can take responsibility for everyone's safety You can be forgotten when everything's going fine! You can be the one that gets blamed when something goes wrong! Well go on take over and tell us what to damn well do!"
He paused while staring at Tom daring him to pick up the gauntlet that he had thrown at him.
" I'm waiting!" Rob couldn't help himself but smile inside, this reminded him off a time at school when he had dared a boasting fellow classmate to carry out one off his numerous boasts but he had backed down humiliating himself , he had never boasted again for the whole of that term , it had felt good then, he was getting that same feeling again and it still felt good!

Tom was starting to feel himself on shaky ground-he had just wanted to shake Rob's cage a bit not cause the whole damned

thing to collapse! He just wasn't ready or prepared to take over the heavy reins of leadership. Backing down like a beaten dog , Tom averted his stare and turned away feeling 3 feet shorter.
"All I'm saying man is don't treat me like a child yeah?" He threatened half-heartedly his eyes too cowardly to face the glare that he could feel Rob firing at him like a laser beam.
" If you stop acting like one then I won't have to!" Rob resolved loudly.
Rob's previous tirade had hit Tom like a knife in the back now his tormentor was seeking to twist that embedded knife. Enough was enough!
He swung round angrily again to once again face Rob like a beaten army rallying together for one final charge.
"NOW JUST WHAT THE HELL IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN!?"
Rob was stunned for a moment, but just for a moment, by the ferocity of Tom's assault but he soon recovered his composure and confidence.
"What that means. " Rob began calmly while approaching the red faced shaking Tom " Is that that ever since we started out on this country break to relax after our degree finals, you've done nothing except complain! Complain about the weather, complain about the walking- .
"BULLCRAP!" Tom blurted out uncontrollably while turning to Ros hopeful for some much needed support, hopes that were smashed to pieces by her blunt and direct words.
"He's right darling you've been bitching big time." She sounded off with a wicked smirk on her face as if taking pleasure in the humiliation of her partner.

Tom knew when he was beaten, his girlfriend's reproachful response having sealed his defeat and Rob's victory.
"OK! OK! OK! So which way do we go now?" Tom threw up his hands in a bewildered fashion.
"Anyway looks as good as the other!" sighed Ros indifferently taking a few paces forward to her right.
" Hey!" Rob announced authoritatively " No one's going off anywhere till we get our bearings! Then we go off as a team together! We may be lost in these woods but I'm not gonna allow us to get lost from each other!" he ordered .
"How?" pestered Tom "Following that crap piece of paper will only get us more lost than we are already !"
"Make history and use your head" Rob remarked scathingly. "That piece of paper is our only hope of keeping on schedule and finding the main camp tomorrow!"
Rob turned to address the rest of the group.
"Now let's stick together and think together so that we can get out of here together! Are we agreed on that? "
"Jawohl mein kapitan!" Tom replied sarcastically while mockingly saluting him , he was pleased to get an opportunity to show off his German.
Rob returned the compliment in kind "Dunkopf !" he gruffly replied Then turned his attention to Sue with an encouraging smile.
"That compass making any sense yet babe?"
"As damn crazy as ever!"
" Could be some iron ore deposit affecting it- maybe underground somewhere!"
" If you're right you could open up a crap load of mines and make a killing! But I don't think its that!"

"What else could it be?" injected Ros.
"I'm not sure maybe sunspots even-"
"Let's not get into a discussion about it right now. There's no time!" interrupted Rob surveying the darkening sky worriedly." We've got to make a decision here and now on what we gonna do!"
"Well you're the one whose suppose to be in charge of this little expedition" surmised Ros quick as usual to point out who she saw as the blame for any problem "Why don't you tell us what to do?"
"Yeah I've had it up to here with all this damn walking" Tom started to complain again
"It's getting dark!" observed Sue stating the obvious.
"EVERYONE PUT A LID ON IT!" barked Rob as he intervened in an attempt to stop a mini civil war from breaking out. "You're adults not a bunch of school kids! Now use your common sense!" Rob turned briskly to Sue intent on sorting things out once and for all.
"We're supposed to be heading in a north-east direction right hon?"
"Yeah!"
"Well the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. that puts north-east over there!"
He pointed confidently sure of this particular orienteering nugget of information.
"Look it'll be dark soon .I say we make camp in that clearing we just passed and we can make an early start in the morning. Any objections?"
"Well I-" droned Tom
" SHUT UP!" Ros cut him short while speaking aloud what everyone else was thinking.

"OK let's go to it then!!" Rob concluded in a business like manner, striding ahead of his unhappy band of hikers who trailed behind, strolling leisurely unconcerned with keeping pace with Rob's frantic pace.
"Get a move on everyone!" ordered Rob, genuinely concerned at the other's lack of haste. " Let's hurry up and get back to that clearing and set up camp while we can still see what we're doing!"
The others heard Rob's nervous tone and saw the logic in what he was saying , they all started to pick up their pace and after a brief trek back through the blackening wood they had soon reached the clearing. They needed to examine the ground to find the best place for their tents, but it was too dark by then to see the ground clearly so Rob turned on his special compact camper's torch. This torch might have been fine for illuminating the interior of tents but it was frustratingly out of its depth when it came to showing up any area larger than 2 square feet. The best that Rob's ground survey could accomplish was just to pathetically show up patches of the clearing out of the tar blackness a bush here , some stones there , for Rob it was like trying to put together a jigsaw- in his mind!

"We're camping here??!!" Tom complained rudely awakening Rob from his thoughts
"What's your problem now Tom ?"
" He's never happy unless he's bitching about something!" Ros reminded the others.
" SHUT UP! You should be supporting me not continuously damn well stabbing me in the back!" Tom accused her with intense anger in his voice but with hurt in his eyes.
Ros was equally intense but this time with sarcasm and scathing.

"Whatever you say darling!"
Tom decided to take her reply at face value and ignored her tone making himself believe that he had at least won some sort of victory. But Rob was his real target, who he continued to rant at.
"Look even you can see what the problem is! The ground ain't right. The damn pegs won't hold!
Tom kicked the earth with his heel, the sound of dirt showering down and disappearing into the cloak of darkness around them
"Trust me Tom the pegs will hold!" pleaded Rob not only with Tom but also with his own self- control and sanity not to desert him. He tried to distract himself from Tom's rantings and started to unbuckle his back pack but Tom wasn't going to given up now!
"On top of that!" exclaimed Tom. "The ground's damn well soaking! We'll end up with sodden groundsheets and pneumonia!
"Trust me Tom your ground sheet won't get soaked and you won't die from pneumonia ! I promise! Does that make you happy?"
Rob half pleaded with Tom against his better judgement. It was a judgement that proved correct with Tom's next words
"Huh! I still ain't happy and I still think that this is a damn crappy place to camp!" He rattled on not sure how to view Rob's entreaty to him.
"If you're unhappy here then find a place where you are happy and camp there." Rob remarked casually while turning his back on him in a gesture to try and brush-off any more off his grumblings.
"We'll see you back here in the morning Tom OK?" he continued equally casually his back still turned to him.
"Not damn likely!" an alarmed Ros chipped in before rounding angrily on Tom saving her most scathing voice for him.
"We're camping here!" she ordered abruptly. "I'm not going off to some damn remote corner where we'll be on her own !" She had

always been afraid of sleeping alone in her own room with the light off never mind sleeping out in this dark open wilderness!
"Your lady's talking sense!" smirked Rob smugly . " There's always safety in numbers!"
It not only annoyed Tom that Rob was speaking the truth , what frustrated him even further was that Rob was speaking the obvious which was making him look even more stupid by the second. He tried a quick retort to put down Rob's wisdom.
"Safe from what? Snoring squirrels or some dopey wood louse!"
All this accomplished for Tom was just to backfire in his face with Ros's shrill terrified cry.
"Don't mention woodlouse you know how I hate creepy crawlies!"
"No! Not squirrels or insects" Rob whispered in an ominously hushed manner as if he was just going to divulge some long kept terrible secret.
The others infected with Rob's quiet foreboding looked at him in nervous silence which was only broken sporadically by the rustle of leaves chasing each other round in circles. It was Tom who dared to enquire further "What then?"
But the only reply he got was Rob's silence.
"What?" Tom's voice had all the desperation of a drowning man afraid of what the future has to hold but knowing that he has no choice but to face it
" I've heard stories" Rob at last continued albeit vaguely.
Tom let out a sigh of relief hating Rob almost as much as he hated himself for having let himself been worked up into such a state of tension and over what- just some damned old housewife tales!
"Yeah? So what about these totally made up stories?" Tom glared scathingly at Rob then glanced at Ros and Sue. They seemed totally mesmerised by this forthcoming fable that had obviously

originally been invented by a mother to keep her little child in line and a fable perpetuated by other mothers for the same purpose.
"Not totally made up!" Rob retorted even though he didn't believe the stories himself there was no way in hell that he was going let Tom belittle his storytelling efforts not in front of his girlfriend at least. He was going to make them believe every single word!
"Not totally made up!" Rob repeated. "But then again not totally true! At least I hope not totally true for our sakes!" he added feigning angst in his voice as if he was agonising as to whether or not he should tell them anymore.
"I wish you shut the crap up Rob you're giving me Goosebumps!" a shivering Ros half-lied as the last thing in the world she wanted him to do was to shut up and keep the rest of the terrible truth that he knew to himself.
Tom however was determined not to be taken in so easily by this web of fiction.
" So what's this so scaaaaaary true story?" he mocked .

Unflustered by Tom's sarcasm Rob looked round at the attentive faces and began. "Its a story older than the woods themselves, so old in fact that people have forgotten which parts are true and which are false. Pagans used this area for farming, they grew wheat here but the earth was often barren and hard so they had to fertilise the crops frequently."
"Yeah gotta hand it to yer pal you can really tell 'em. Fertilising crops that's scary alright!" Tom jumped in without thinking only to be silenced with a chastening glare from Ros.
Rob turned to Tom and put on as honest and as serious expression as possible " I wish that was all to it as well Tom but it isn't." He then turned away so as to address them all.

"They would forcibly separate some of the local population , usually the very old who were too old too work, or children that were too young to work. They would gather them together in pens like they were cattle then one by one they would slit their throats as if they were pigs.. They would use the human blood as liquid fertiliser!".
Tom's lower jaw dropped down leaving his mouth gaping open wide "GOD DAMN!"
Sue however was too scared to speak and could only manage a muted "Oh hell!"
Ros had also been shocked by Rob's grisly story and snapped at him like a shark " Shut up Rob I've heard more than enough!"

But Rob wasn't going to be denied the increasing enjoyment he felt as he sensed the terror that he was inflicting on the group, which ultimately gave him a sense of power and control! If he was honest with himself he supposed that he was just a bit of your everyday run of the mill control freak! But it was a feeling of control that was ironically also controlling him and which spurred him on.-" There's still more to hear- when the bodies had been bled dry they were stripped and buried in the fields so that they could rot down into human compost to make the soil fertile once more."
Tom's mocking mood had gradually been thinning away with every word of the story that Rob had uttered now the façade slipped away completely to reveal pure panic, all previous rivalry and differences now temporarily forgotten.
He managed to resist the urge to blurt out the thought 'Please say that you're kidding us!' and instead it came out as "You gotta be kidding us!"

"Well that's how the stories goes!" Rob folded his hands contentedly satisfied at the damage that he had done to the other's self-confidence and calm-no one would be sleeping easily tonight -except him of course! Which would of course leave the others to marvel at his calm and self-control
"H-H-How could they do something so evil?" Sue stammered out.
"It was part of their culture, their religion" he tried to explain vainly in an attempt to find some reason in their evil madness
"They were brought up to accept it as a normal part of their life, something that they had to do so that they wouldn't all perish!" He concluded weakly.
"What happened to them?" pestered Sue
"They all perished!" replied Rob blandly his voice as ironic as his words. "I think that they must have killed themselves off. They must have murdered more people than were being born. and they just died out, no trace is left of them-except just..."
" Except what?" Tom interrupted his brow sweaty with fear even in the biting cold.
"I thought you weren't interested!" Rob mocked relishing every word of this game.
"Don't mess with my head you've started the story now finish it!"demanded Tom.

Rob didn't need to be asked twice he had been saving the best till last.

"Some people say that if you put your ear to the ground you can hear the restless souls of the slaughtered victims trying to crawl their way to the surface, begging to be released from their graves!"

The others looked at Rob in hushed silence then at each other their fearful eyes a reflection of the others fear.
"Do you think its all true?" Sue dared to ask, hoping to God that no one would answer 'yes'.
"I don't know that's just how the story goes." Rob shrugged his shoulders resignedly having nothing more to add to the ghoulish tale- the others' terrified imaginations would do that!
"Spooky story good job that its all bullcrap!" Tom blustered in with outer confidence but with inner doubt.
"Prove it!" Ros barked at him anxiously, desperate for him to drive any belief in this story away.
Tom turned to Ros in a state of shock hoping that he had misheard her, she had been the person that he would have least had expected to call his bluff!
"What?"
"Go on prove it!"
"And how the hell am I supposed to do that?"
"Put your ear to the ground and see what happens!"
"Why the hell should I do that ? I'll only end up with dirt down my ear!"
"That's only an excuse you're scared crapless!"
"Go to hell Ros!"
"Go on admit it , You're crapping in your pants just by thinking about it!
" Am I ? I am? Just damn well watch me!"
Tom was all fired up by now , his anger at Ros having driven out all fear and caution. Seeing a nearby patch of dry earth he immediately knelt down and lowered his head to the ground till he could feel the soft doughy dirt on his earlobe. The others stood round watching in varying degrees of mood ranging from stark

terror with the ladies to mild amusement with Rob as he tried hard not to laugh over what a fool Tom was making of himself!
Tom pressed his ear closer to the ground trying to pick up any sounds but knowing that he wouldn't- well at least hopefully wouldn't!
"I can hear -" he began expectantly before pausing.
"I can hear-" he began yet again his voice filled with excited anticipation
" What ? What is it?" Ros cried out shrilly drawing the others closer to Tom with a sense of terrified morbid curiosity.
" I can hear-" Tom's face was fraught with tension and bewilderment as if he was trying to describe a sound that he had never heard before "NOTHING!!" he suddenly bellowed out causing the others to jump despite the word that he was shouting!
" Funny! Very funny!" Sue remarked as she looked down at the jubilant Tom whose face had creased up with laughter!
Rob also felt a bit foolish , even he had been taken in with this practical joke , he had to hand it to Tom he had kidded the kidder!
"You had us going there joker!" Rob beamed.
Ros on the other hand was not quite so forth coming in her praise.
"You're a real asshole you know!"
Tom with his head still to the ground and still howling with laughter like a hyena could only nod smiling and splutter out "My speciality!"
But in an instant as abruptly as his laughter had began it stopped to be replaced by a scream of pain.
"HELP ME ! FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE HELP ME!"
The others had by now lost interest in this over-used joke and had started to put up their tents for the night
"Help yourself pal!" chortled Rob "and put up your tent just like

we're doing!" he jibed as he and Sue went off to a promising part of the clearing that looked dry leaving Sue glaring at her clownish shrieking boyfriend."Give it a rest Tom no ones listening and no one cares!

" I'M NOT CRAPPING AROUND ROS SOMETHING'S GOT MY EAR!" Tom tried to twist his head up to look up at her but as he did he heard or to be more precise felt the sickening sound of his own flesh being torn like paper away from his head as he tried to tilt it!
The horror of the scene hit Ros all at once through all her senses, the smell of blood, the sound and the sight of the agony being inflicted on Tom, she reeled back from the force of it all overwhelmed for a moment by the ferocious horror of it all that she was being forced to take in.
The cry that came out of her mouth was a cry of anguish direct from her soul.
"OH GOD NO! "
For a moment that seemed to last an hour her feet seem to have grown roots and implanted themselves in the ground, but in an instance the desperate need to save her lover took over and she dived towards him grabbing his tortured face in a grotesque wrestling match with this unseen force, a wrestling match in which the prize would be Tom's head!
"TOM! TOM!" she cried at him and over him as she wept in despair when she saw his agony. He tried to say something to her or perhaps to cry out in pain to her but it was as if the muscles in his mouth were paralysed or worse still it was almost as if all life and energy was being stolen by someone or something. Despite the horrific circumstances .Ros envisaged something worse, much

more worse what if his mouth muscles , his facial muscles , perhaps even his whole brain was being sucked out of him through the side of his face which was still trapped in the earth. Where were Rob and Sue? Hadn't they heard her cry of shock? She gripped the exposed side of Tom's head and gave an almighty yank but her efforts were rewarded with more screams from Tom!
" I CAN'T GET HIM UP!" she yelled out forlornly as much to herself as to the others.
"WHAT THE HELL'S GOING ON?" Rob's voice mirrored her own terror , if she hadn't been trying to save Tom she would have hugged him for coming as well as kicked him for taking so damn long!
She was too exhausted to give a coherent answer. She didn't need to bother, Rob could see exactly what was going on and it was no practical joke!
Sue was the next to arrive on the scene shortly after Rob.
"TOM??!!" Ros shouted at him disbelief mingled with her words as her brain refusing to believe that this was really the Tom that she knew and sometimes loved. Where the hell had Rob and Sue been? She glimpsed Rob embarrassingly wiping away a smeared lipstick in the same instant she thought she saw Sue buttoning up her tight skin-hugging blouse. The question didn't nag her again.

Rob was too concerned in trying to save Tom to take in and be stunned by the equal horror and absurdity that the situation conveyed. He didn't like Tom a lot of the time especially when he got into one of his 'who can impress the girls the most contests' but at the end of the day Tom was his friend, a friend who was in trouble- a hell of a lot of trouble! Getting a firm grip on his friend's head which in turn gave much needed support to Ros's

aching fingers, he pulled away with all strength his muscles could muster. At first it seemed to be to no avail then slowly, painfully slowly Tom's face began to become unstuck from the seemingly suction filled earth.

It was a sight that Sue could barely look at and although disgusted with herself for not being able to help her friends it didn't compare to the disgust she felt as Tom's face was slowly pulled upwards away from its silent captor which still held obstinately onto the skin covering his left cheek causing it to become sickening stretched like a piece of gum.

All that she could see was pain and all that she could hear was the screams , screams of shock , of desperation, of agony! Her eyes clouded over and she felt the giddiness of a faint approaching. She heard a grotesque peeling snap and the heavy sound of bodies falling heavily to the ground, she forced her eyes open and to her relief saw that they had pulled Tom free, but he now seemed to be in more pain than ever if that was possible! He rolled about uncontrollably with his hand clasped over his gaping cheek wound like a steel clamp with the others chasing him trying to pin him down. Sue could no longer stand by and watch the scene unfold without trying to offer some assistance no matter how small and insignificant it amounted to.
Rushing forward she tried to grab a hold of his flailing legs while Rob tried to get hold of his arms.
"HOLD HIM STILL!" he shouted the obvious to the others in a vain attempt to exert some control over the demented and unbelievable situation.
With great difficulty they waged a war against Tom's pain fuelled

strength, on several occasions they almost lost the battle but by sheer weight of numbers they managed to overwhelm him and pin him down.
"ITS OK TOM WE'VE GOT YOU NOW WE'VE GOT YER!" pleaded Rob slowly calming down Tom who managed to lower his cries of pain to a low whimper, but who still kept his hand glued to his cheek which not only stopped the bleeding but which also thankfully shielded the others from seeing how grotesque the wound really was.
Sue stood transfixed, she wanted to be of more use but couldn't move her feet of stone .It was Rob's voice that turned them back into flesh and blood.
"The first aid kit's in my backpack Sue!"
Brought back to her senses she ran off to get it, leaving Ros kneeling next to Tom trying to comfort him.
"I'm sorry darling I'm sorry! You're gonna be alright honest you will be!" Ros tried to reassure Tom as she knelt next to him, while Rob painstakingly prised away Tom's vice-like grip on his cheek to reveal a mass of ripped bloody skin.
"God help us! The skin's been stripped away! Its as if its been eaten away by acid!" Rob exclaimed equally amazed as he was horrified that some plain ordinary dirt could have done this!
Ros let out a sob of terror in response and looked away from a sight that she knew her stomach wouldn't be able to stand.
"We gotta sterilise it!" demanded Rob.
" Rob here!"
Rob spun round to see Sue behind him first aid kit in one hand a bottle of antiseptic in the other.

"Thanks babe!" Rob quickly snatched the bottle. "There's no way

to avoid this pal! This is gonna hurt like hell!" he warned Tom who could only nod slightly in acknowledgement and splutter out through gritted teeth
"Stop crapping around and just do it!"
"Find a stick put it between his teeth so that he doesn't bite his tongue off!" Rob ordered the 2 girls.
Ros was the first to find a strong looking stick and wedged it between his teeth.
"Bite down hard if it hurts baby, just bite down hard" she begged.
Tom clenched his teeth down hard over the rough decaying bark, he could taste and smell the sour stench of mould. He almost spat out the stick when he felt something like an insect exploring his tongue but before he could do anything Rob poured the antiseptic over the side of his face, Tom forgot everything about the mouldy stick, the insect , even about the people around him all he could see , hear , and above all feel was his own searing pain which struck him like a lightning flash blinding him to everything except his own suffering.

Tom yelled uncontrollably through his clenched teeth trying to snap the stick that held them apart..
Suddenly Ros couldn't take anymore of the suffering that Tom was enduring "STOPPIT THE PAIN WILL KILL HIM!! YOU'RE KILLING HIM! YOU'RE KILLING HIM!" she yelled hysterically simultaneously making a grab at the bottle that was causing so much pain. But Rob pre-empted her move and kept the bottle away from her at arms length while using his free hand to keep her from coming any closer and spilling the precious liquid.
"IF WE DON'T DO THIS THE WOUND WILL GET INFECTED HE COULD GET GANGURINE THAT WILL KILL

HIM. DO YOU WANT THAT?" he bluntly asked her point-blank.
Ros froze helpless and frustrated wanting to help Tom but not knowing how. Sue saw what she had to do and pulled Ros away while consoling her and embracing her tightly like a sister.
"Don't look Ros its better if you don't look!" Sue begged, Ros nodded and sobbed on her friend's shoulder.
Meanwhile Tom could feel his consciousness being engulfed by a tidal wave of pain that finally drowned it sending him to the dark depths of unconsciousness.
"OH MY GOD! TOM!!!" cried out Ros dreading the worse when she saw Tom slump backwards.
"Its alright he's just passed out!" Rob breathed a sigh of relief as he moved away from Tom totally drained. "At least he won't feel any pain for a while." He added.
" I'll get some bandages for his face" Sue interjected helpfully "-take a breather Rob you've earned it!"
Rob nodded his thanks appreciatively.
Sue turned to get the bandages but Ros clung desperately onto her tightly, too terrified to let go!
"Don't leave me! Please don't leave me!"
"I'm not leaving you! I'm not! I promise! but I've got to help Tom! " Sue protested.
"Its OK its gonna be OK Ros! I promise!" Rob gently intervened by taking her hands off Sue then held Ros tightly allowing Sue to go off to get the bandages.
Ros looked up searchingly into Rob's eyes hoping to find some answers to the madness that had been thrust upon them.
"What the hell could have done that to him?"
Rob paused not sure what answer to give.

" I don't know!" he at last replied honestly, knowing that this was the last answer that she wanted to hear.
"Could that story you told - Could it be true?" she enquired tentatively.
"There has be some other rational explanation, someone could have dumped some acid where he put his face, it was a tragic coincidence that's all!" Rob concluded.
"You think it was acid ?" Ros couldn't believe that after all this Rob could come up with such an ordinary reason for the past extraordinary events.
"Yeah it must have been acid, we'll get him to a hospital tomorrow, a month from now we'll be laughing about all of this!"
"You really think so? "
"Yeah I really think so!" Rob lied badly averting his eyes away from her prying stare as he said this. When he looked back at her clear, soft skin and pouting cherry ripe lips he had an overwhelming urge to kiss them but he resisted knowing that on all counts it would be a really stupid thing to do. Instead he had to be satisfied with a long lingering look coupled with a worried question.
"How do yer feel?"
"A bit better!"
"Better enough to help me set up your tent? That way Tom will be somewhere warm and dry when he wakes up. OK?"
Nodding compliantly and gripping his arm tightly they both carefully walked round the piece of ground where Tom had got his face burnt. Rob could feel Ros's petite fingers digging into his arm , he could even feel her galloping pulse as it cruised away under her skin. It may him feel wanted. It made him feel aroused.
"Careful!" Rob warned her using it as a welcome reason to rope

his arms around her slimline waist. "There could be more acid round here we'll put the tent up over there!"
He confidently pointed to another part of the clearing and leading Ros by the hand they made their way over to the spot past Sue who was deeply engrossed in patching up Tom the best she could.

Rob quickly unravelled the tent and with Ros's help they soon had it up, around them the night air echoed with the sound of Rob pounding away at the last of the metal tent pins with a small wooden mallet.

With at least one of the tents up they gathered around the still unconscious Tom.
"OK let's get him inside" urged Rob grabbing Tom by his shoulders and giving him an almighty heave upwards. The girls followed suite and although lacking Rob's strength equally matched his determination with each of them grabbing one of Tom's legs.

As they lifted him up Tom started to stir.
"AH GOD IT HURTS!" Tom moaned loudly unashamedly his hand immediately straying towards his bandage with the sole intention of tearing it off and scratching deeply at his throbbing wound. But Sue wasn't going to wait and see all her hard work undone and seizing his hand kept it from getting any further to its goal.
"You mustn't touch it or scratch it. It will just make it more painful!" she scolded him.
" I just gotta , its throbbing like hell!" Tom pleaded.
"I know it is but you mustn't!" Sue tried to sympathise in her most

heartfelt voice.
"Ros make sure he doesn't Ok?"
Ros nodded in agreement.
Tom mustered what humour he had left in order to try and improve the sombre mood and forced himself to break out into a painful smile that made him feel that his whole face was tearing itself in two!
"What's the plan now mein Kapitan?" he addressed Rob smiling weakly and trying to laugh but instead grimacing in pain.
"First you're getting in that tent with your girlfriend . Then Sue and me are gonna get some firewood to keep us all warm dunkopf!" ordered Rob equally comically returning Tom's clownish smile.

Lifting him gently they carefully carried Tom over to the tent and laid him inside for Ros to give him some tender loving care something that Rob felt he was in desperate need of from Sue. Just before vanishing inside the green plastic flap Ros turned round and cast him a worried glance. There was no need for words he knew instantly what she was thinking.
"Don't worry we won't be far and we won't be long" Rob reassured her intuitively.
"Just make sure you're damn well not!" warned Ros.
"Stay close to him" advised Sue "Keep each other warm and make sure that he doesn't scratch that bandage."
"How about your tent?" enquired Ros worried as she spotted their still unpacked tent.
"We'll put that up when we get back" replied Rob brushing the problem away casually "Starting the fire is our first priority. Share this amongst yourself it will help give you energy for your

body to keep you warm." He concluded logically as he gave a medium-sized bar of plain chocolate, it's foil wrapper glinting in the darkness.
Nodding her gratitude Ros retreated into the tent.
"Keep it zipped up till we start the fire OK?" Rob shouted after her.
"OK!" agreed Ros.
"Hey Tom!" called Rob.
"What?" Tom's pain-ridden voice came back.
"Don't do anything that I wouldn't do OK?" he joked.

His joke found the mark though and Tom answered him with his laughter which soon dissolved into a fit of coughing. Ros zipped up the tent entrance and went to nurse her boyfriend. There was nothing more which Rob and Sue could now for him at the moment he was in Ros's caring hands.
Rob turned to Sue and her questioning gaze met his confident smile, he kissed her lightly.
"Let's go!" whispered Rob.

They both set out into the surrounding twisted maze of trees searching the ground and picking up the occasional branch.
"These damn branches are too large too green and too wet they won't burn well if at all!" he complained bitterly. " We need to try and find some dried twigs" he concluded in a down-trodden tone of voice.
"Perhaps we should go a bit a deeper maybe they'll be drier!" voiced Sue hopefully.
"But I don't like the idea of leaving Ros and Tom alone longer than we have to !" she added worriedly.

"I don't like it either!" agreed Rob "But we need to get that fire started and we're not gonna get one going with this crap!" he continued as objectively as possible , a feat that required more will power with each passing freezing moment.
He glanced disgustedly at the few pathetic looking few sticks in his shivering hand and chucked them back down to the hard earth. They would be good to neither man or beast -only to fungi or insects!
"Maybe I should go back and stay with the others." suggested Sue.
" No we keep in pairs so that one if one of us has any problems the other can help."
"What do you mean by trouble ?" Sue whispered fearfully as if something or someone unknown was listening to them. She edged instinctively closer to Rob for some much needed security and slipped her nimble hand round him .
"You don't think that it was an abandoned vat of acid that burnt Tom do you?"
" I don't know what to think! All I know is that we're not taking any more chances than we have to! That means we stick together in a group. OK?"
"OK!"
" Let's head this way! Stay close to me!"
" Don't worry I'll stick to you like glue!"
Rob smiled. Partly because of what she said and partly because of what she did- stroke his chest. She acted like a little girl lost sometimes but under all that was a beautiful , mature woman who knew how to turn him on like a bright light bulb!
"It doesn't look much better here- how about heading back there?" Sue said as she pointed back to the way that they had just come.

"We've covered that ground already it will just be a waste of time!"
" I still think its worth a another look ! It will only take a minute for me to have to have a quick scout around!"
" If you're going there so am I!"
" That will be a waste of time we can cover twice the ground in the same time if we split up."
" I know that! I also know that we'll be in twice as much danger!"
" You'll be able to keep an eye on me from where you are. I'll even call out your name every minute if that'll make you feel better!"
Rob thought quickly, they had to get some firewood and get it soon, but at the same time they had to balance that with the danger of being alone in these woods. But they would be no more than about 50ft away! What could possibly happen with him there to protect her from any danger? If there was any danger!
Rob sighed and nodded resignedly.
"OOOOK! Go and have a little search if you want to - just don't forget my name alright?"
"I won't!"
She smiled a sweet good-bye which he returned as they parted. He watched her intently for awhile as she strode off purposely while scouring the ground closely and picking up the occasional branch.
"ROB I'M OK!" she called out as promised just as she came across a large pile of dry branches ,more than an ample amount for the fire that would keep them warm through the night.
"Great !" she exclaimed excitedly as she greedily gathered them up quickly.
"I'VE GOT SOME GOOD FIREWOOD HERE ROB!"

Silence was her reply.
"ROB HONEY WHERE ARE YOU?"
Only the rustling leaves talked back to her.
"ROB? WHERE THE HELL ARE YER?"
Dropping her wooden treasure she scrambled back to where she had last seen Rob, scattered branches were the only sign that he had ever been there.
"ROOOOOB!" she hollowed out bewildered and shocked while looking about wide and wild-eyed for any glimpse of her lover, but trees and more trees were all that she could see.
Suddenly Sue's whole frame stiffened with freezing terror , her limbs , her tongue all frozen hard! SOMETHING was gripping tightly onto her arm. Even her eyes couldn't find the courage to move sideways and see what was doing this . Sue felt a scream coming on, but the freezing terror even stifled that.
"Sue!" came a familiar voice.
It was Rob! It was Rob! Sue could have leapt for joy and hugged him at that moment a joyous feeling that was quickly replaced by the urge to punch him in the face!
She turned round intent on giving him a tirade of verbal abuse the like that he had never heard before and by the time she had finished he would hope would never hear again!
But as soon as she saw Rob's face all her words failed her! She could see the worry and fear in his face and the physical effort that he was having to exert in order to control that fear. Rob quickly put a finger to his lips to motion for her silence.
But silence was the last thing on Sue's numbed mind.
"ROB WHAT THE-"
He stopped her quickly by this time putting his hand tightly over her mouth.

"Don't talk! listen!" he hissed not looking at Sue for a moment but instead scanning the tree line that surrounded them immediately unstifling her mouth.
"I don't hear a damned thing what-"
A voice interrupted her and cut her words dead. Not Rob's reassuring tones something that seemed like a wisp of smoke, it was low at first then slowly built up , it was saying something - what was it? Then it hit her like a lightning flash -IT WAS CALLING THEIR NAMES!
Sue gasped in terror her voice reduced to a low whisper as well.
"Who-"
" I don't know!"
"How does he know our names ?"
"Who says that its a he , who says that its even human?"
" Maybe its somebody who can help us?"
"It doesn't sound like someone it sounds like SOMETHING. We've gotta get back the others!"

Even before he had finished the mysterious voice continued its crescendo . It was getting closer ….

Back at the camp Ros and Tom snuggled up lovingly up to each other.
"How you're feeling baby?" Ros enquired gently.
"In goddamned pain!"
" Don't fret! Rob and Sue will be back with some firewood soon to build us a roaring fire!"
"Well they had better get back soon! I'm already half -frozen to damn death!"
"They'll be back soon!"

Suddenly they heard Sue outside the tent calling out for Ros.
"Oh Sue you're back where's Rob?" Ros replied in undisguised relief.
"Right behind me now open up the tent will yer ! Hurry!"
Ros could tell that something was wrong and wasted no time in quickly fumbling with the knots that held the 2 canvas flaps together. The last knot came apart in her hand and she quickly put her head out to welcome Sue and Rob out of the cold but no sooner had she poked her head out then she let a blood curdling scream! Tom looked on petrified not knowing what was terrifying Ros.
"HELP ME TOM! HELP ME!" Ros screamed over and over again.
" ROS! WHAT'S THE HELL GOING ON?!" He screamed back as he painfully threw himself forward and started to drag her back into the tent, but he wasn't strong enough and soon found himself being pulled forward to the tent entrance along with Ros to meet whatever lay waiting for them outside! He felt the fear in his veins suck out all the strength in his hands and to his shock and disbelief watched as she slipped from his failing grasp!
"OH PLEASE GOD NO!" cried out Tom through his tears as he cowered back into a corner afraid, with his eyes sealed tight and his hands clamped over his face. It was as if he were a child again who had just seen something horrible that he thought would be gone as soon as he opened his eyes again, but Ros's screams told him that that wasn't going to happen!

"TOM !THEY 'RE KILLING MEEEEE!!" Ros wailed out in her agony.
But Tom continued to cower in the corner with his hands pressing

even harder against his skull as if trying to crush the wails from his brain. His eyes seemed to be clamped down by heavy iron weights, while all the time he shook his head violently refusing to accept the horrific reality of the situation.
"NOOO! NOOO!"
At that moment it was as if reality had obeyed him and silence descended all around bringing with it an eerie uncertain calm. He forced his eyes open and looked about- there was no one! He let his hands slowly slide down from his ears and he heard nothing… for a second!

Out of the gloom a face shot towards to him, grossly disfigured ,scarred and burnt yet still terrifyingly familiar. IT WAS ROS!
"You worthless sack of crap! You left me to die you bastard! " she rasped
"This isn't real its not happening. You're not here! YOU'RE NOT HERE! I'M GONNA SHUT MY EYES AND WHEN I OPEN THEM YOU'LL BE GONE! YOU'LL BE GONE!"

Desperately he shut his eyes then opened them but all at once Ros appeared again thrusting her face again in front of him displaying her bloody torn throat!
"Look what you let them do to me you bastard ! You piece of crap! LOOK AT ME !" the tortured creature that resembled Ros demanded. Tom tried to look away but Ros's ravaged throat started to come closer and closer to him till it became a blur and he blissfully passed out.

When he came round again the tent was empty -but not for long! Out of nowhere a blood-stained hand was thrust into the tent. It

was Ros's!
"Help me please Tom! I'm dying hold my hand please." She cried out in a weak pathetic voice.
With tears streaming shamelessly down his face Tom stretched out his shaking hand.
"No Ros don't die I'm sorry Ros I'm sorry! Forgive me" he begged her as he held her hand for the last time. Suddenly her failing weak grip seemed to find new found strength as it gripped Tom's hand and dragged him kicking , screaming, scratching and biting out of the tent.

Sue and Rob held each other tighter as they heard the screams, the strange voice had gone only to be replaced with these even worse nightmarish sounds.
"Oh God that screaming Rob you don't think that it could have been - "
"Who else could it have been? We gotta go back!"
"No damn way! I'm waiting here! "
"We can't wait any longer they must need our help!"
"They must be dead!"
"What the hell are you on about we're not sure of a damn thing unless we get to them!"
"Look we've got to take care of each other first! Damn them !"
"Those are our friends you're talking about!"
"Your friends not my friends!"
"What the hell's gotten into you?"
" I'm scared crapless that's what gotten into me! Aren't you?"
"Who isn't? That doesn't mean we can't still do the right thing!"
"Let them take care of each other. Its too dangerous out there! They may even have fled into the woods! They may be safe

already!"
" We don't know that for sure unless we go back and find out!"
"Don't you mean unless you find out! I'm not going anywhere I'm staying here!"
"Yeah you do that and you might die here as well!" As far as Rob was concerned now he had talked enough! It was time for action and he got up angrily but Sue grabbed him.
"There's something out there -something that could be after us!"
"All the more reason for us to keep on the move!"
Rob could see the stark naked terror in her eyes and understood at once the real depth of her fear. He crouched back down again and looked her straight in the eye.
"If we stay in one place sooner or later it will find us! We've got to get back to camp and warn the others so that we all try and figure out what the hell's going on!"
"Please stay! Stay here with me!"
" Don't force me to make a choice! I heard them screaming and so did you ! Now take my hand and lets go!"
Sue looked at his hand then back up at him.
"Come on let's go before its too late!"
"If it isn't already!"
"Let's hope to God that that it isn't! Now come on!"
Ros at last grabbed Rob's hand and both ran off in the direction of the camp, moving from tree to tree checking that the coast was clear then moving on, after what seemed like eternity and a day they finally reached the campsite.
"ROS! TOM ! WHERE ARE YER?" Rob bellowed out.
He looked down to see the answer before him. In front of him he could see some red stains which led up to their tent. Rob and Ros looked at each other their looks betraying the unspoken dread in

their hearts . Plucking up his courage and pushing back his fear Rob stooped down and smelt it.
"Blood !"
Sue gasped and felt as if her heart was going to explode.
"I'm outta here!"
Sue tried to run but Rob kept her hand shackled to his with his vice-like fingers.
"Stay where you are and stop panicking!"
"We've gotta get away NOW!"
"NO! Stay where you are! You're not going anywhere-not until I take a look in that tent!"
"You gotta be damn well joking!
"We've got to find Ros and Tom- they may be wounded that's no joke!"
"Please! We've gotta -"
" NOT YET!" boomed Rob his voice burning with defiance.
"We've got more chance of getting through this if we stick together -Now watch my back and don't move!"
Rob moved stealthily towards the ordinary-looking tent that could have any one of many macabre secrets to reveal to him. He reached there sooner than he wanted to but mustered his courage and carefully, very carefully he started to pull back one of the flaps slowly.

"NO ROB DON'T !" Sue pleaded with him, but Rob was deaf to her words peered inside the tent. The sight that he saw along with the smell that assaulted his senses made him recoil instantly .

In front of him dangling just behind the tent entrance were 2 human hearts!

Rob let out a cry of shock while staggering back, while Sue put her hand over her mouth to stop her screaming out in terror, even though that stopped the screams it didn' t stop the vomit as it spewed out of her mouth.
Rob tried to snatch his breath back, his eyes not allowing him to divert his stare away from the 2 human hearts that swung macabrely in the night air .
"Sue!"
But Sue who was still coughing violently and being sick couldn't answer.
"SUE!"
He managed to tear his eyes away from the grisly sight at last, staggered over to Sue and touched her lightly on her shoulder .
"GET THE HELL AWAY FROM ME! GET THE HELL AWAY FROM ME!" Sue yelled out in utter blind panic
"SUE ITS ME ! ITS ME!"
Rob got hold of her and she started to calm down.
"You've got to pull yourself together baby we've gotta get going!"
"Get going where?"
"The way that leads us out of this nightmare- there has to be a way!"
" They could have escaped couldn't they maybe-"
Rob shook his head sadly.
"Don't lie to yourself. They 're both dead and you know it and I know it-we can't help them now!"
"Its my fault they're dead! They died because of me! I shouldn't have stopped you from going -"
"Its not your fault if we had been with them then we would have died with them! We've got to gather whatever we can and keep

going in a North-easterly direction -its our only chance!" .
"Which sick murdering bastard could have done this to Ros and Tom? Who?"
"All I know is that If we stay here then we'll be dead just like they are! We have to get going and keep going because whatever or whoever did this will be back!- To finish the job!"

"I can't stop thinking about them both. I keep seeing their faces and what they went through they didn't deserve this -not this!" Sue started to cry and Rob tightened his grip round her as she buried her head into his shoulders.
"We don't deserve to end up like that either but we will do if we don't get going right now!" Rob stated blandly as he lifted her head gently from his shoulders .
"There'll be time for tears later baby but not now! Right now we've got to worry about us and how we're gonna survive!"
They quickly gathered up their back packs and helped each other put their packs on, suddenly Sue looked round at Rob abruptly
"Oh God! What if its still out there watching us, waiting for us go out in those woods?"
"No I don't think it is!"
"How can you be so sure!"
"If it was out there watching us it wouldn't waste time looking at us it would have attacked us and killed us!"

Suddenly Sue at one felt a strange sinister sensation behind her and immediately spun round, out of nowhere a black robed figure appeared behind them, its face was a deathly white skull and in one of its bony skeletal hands it held a monstrous-looking scythe! Sue let out an ear-piercing scream that could have shattered Rob's

ear -drum and almost did..
Rob turned round this time it was his turn to be shocked.
"Oh God help us! DEATH??!!!" Rob stood frozen in fear and disbelief as he saw the scythe being raised by Death right above its head so that it could be brought down with the maximum force.
"ROB !!"
Sue's shrill voice pulled Rob from out of his shock and he rushed over to Sue just as the scythe came swishing down in a wide arc narrowly missing Rob and hitting the ground instead.
"RUN!" he yelled stating the obvious as he grabbed her and pulled her along towards the woods.
"IT CAN'T BE !IT JUST CAN'T BE!" cried out Sue while trying to look back
"DON'T LOOK AT IT JUST RUN!" demanded Rob."COME ON RUN! FASTER!" he urged.
Sue tried to make her legs move faster but it was as if she was running in mud. She dared to have a quick glance behind her and wished that she hadn't! The creature that they thought looked like Death was making its way to them! It almost seemed to be gliding above the ground! That terrible sight at last drove the message home to her legs and she started to sprint with Rob into the woods.
"ROB!!" Sue wheezed desperately, out of breath.
"DON'T TALK JUST RUN !"
"ROB PLEASE! I'VE GOTTA STOP! PLEASE!" she pleaded as she collapsed to the ground.
"Please let me rest here just for a little while! I feel as if my heart is gonna burst !"
"NO! GET UP!WE GOTTA KEEP MOVING COME ON!
He dragged her forcibly to her feet and tried to pull her along but

she resisted him angrily.
"I CAN'T GO ANOTHER DAMN STEP I TELL YER! I JUST CAN'T!!!
"Listen to me baby I know yer tired! I'm tired too but at the moment you've got the choice of either her heart possibly bursting or that thing we left back there ripping it out ! We just need to go a little further then we'll rest I promise!"
"You promise?"
"Yeah I promise! NOW COME ON LET'S MOVE!"
A few seconds later Rob stopped at a large bush.
"In here quick!"
Sue didn't need to be asked a second time and they both dived in behind it. While Sue tried to get her breath back. Rob kept watch alert to every movement and sound that he saw or hear.
In between snatching quick breaths Sue reviewed the situation trying to find a rational solution in all the madness.
"What the hell did we see back there? A psycho in a Halloween costume?"
"I don't know! I just don't know!" Rob replied honestly.
"It had to be some sicko in disguise right?"
"It didn't look like a disguise it looked real. I think that thing IS for real!"
"You gotta be kidding me right ? All this is just one big joke ain't it?"
Rob stared at her amazed and startled that she could think this after all that they had seen and been through!
"Tom and Ros are alive and all this is just one big joke just to scare the crap outta me yeah??"
Rob shook his head sadly.
"Its alright you won! You all won! I'm scared crapless, honest I

am!" Sue reiterated,then without warning she got up and started to yell out.
"TOM ! ROS! I'M DAMN WELL SCARED OK! YOU CAN COME DAMN WELL COME OUT NOW!"
Rob immediately sprang up and eventually dragged her back down.
"Pull yourself together Sue this is no joke! This is no dream! This is actually happening right here! Right now!"
"No! No!" she protested weakly.
Rob gripped both her arms and turned her round so that she was directly facing him.
"Listen to me baby! Listen to me! Don't go to pieces on me. I need you with your wits about you! Not ranting and raving like some witless idiot! OK?"
Sue gave a small nod
"OK?" Rob asked again unconvinced.
This time she gave a larger more definite nod.
"Its alright I'm fine! Honest I'm fine!"
"That's good babe that's good! If we don't panic then we've at least got a fighting chance against whatever else is thrown against us! Do you feel strong enough to move?"
Sue nodded.
"Good! We've can't afford to waste any time!"
Rob shot up and started to help Sue to her feet. Rob gazed down at her tired face then looked up again only to see Death standing just behind her ready to swing its scythe again!
"SUE LOOK OUT !"
She spun round just in time sees the scythe coming towards her and screamed but Rob pulled her clear just as they felt the swoosh from the blade and heard its sound as it whistled through the

night and ended up embedded in a tree.
"COME ON RUN!"
"WHERE?"
"THIS WAY!!"
Rob turned in a new direction to run , but at every turn he choose Death was already standing there, scythe in hand its blade hungry for blood.
"Its no use! Its everywhere there's no escape!" Sue cried out as she sank to the ground in despair.
"Get up baby!" Rob begged her.
But Sue was oblivious to everything except her own self-pity and continued to sob.
"I said GET UP!" he ordered as he pulled her roughly to her feet.
"What are we gonna do? We're dead just like Tom and Ros! Just like Tom and Ros!
"NO WE'RE NOT DO YER HEAR ME WE'RE NOT! " Rob shouted as he shook her which he stopped abruptly as soon as he saw that Death was now standing closer to them!
"OH GOD ITS GETTING CLOSER! ITS GETTING CLOSER!" panicked Sue.
"I KNOW! Listen to me baby! Calm down and listen to me! It can't be in two places at once do you hear me it can't be in two places at once!"
"But you've seen it , it can disappear and reappear that's no human psychopath at well its Death it can be everywhere at once!"
"Maybe in its spiritual form but its taken on a physical form if I'm right that gives us an escape plan!"
He hazarded another look to see Death still getting ominously closer all the time .
"We'll get only one shot at this! If we blow it then we've had it!"

warned Rob.
"What do want me to do?"
"When I tell you - I want you to you run for your life in one direction . I'll stay where I am so it won't chase after you it will keep coming for me!"
"NO! I DON'T WANT YOU TO DIE!"
"Neither do I! Shortly after you start running then I'll run in the opposite direction!" hopefully I'll be too quick for it and loose it in the woods."
"It doesn't matter where you go it will find you ! It will find us!"
"Maybe but if we can just last till sun rise we'll be fine!"
"How can you be so sure?"
"I'm not. I can only hope and pray that I am!"
He glanced to see that Death was now even closer and was almost within striking distance.
"Try and find the bush that we were hiding by when we were looking for firewood- I'll meet you there later!"
They both embraced and kissed frantically fully realising that it might be the last time that they would be able to do this.
"Come back safely Rob!"
" I will!"
Rob turned back to see that Death was near them and getting ready to strike.
"RUN NOW! NOW!" he yelled.
Sue careered into the woods and Death turned as if to follow.
"I'M OVER HERE! IF YOU WANT ME COME AND GET ME! " taunted Rob.
Death started to turn slowly to Rob who didn't waste any time and immediately put his side of his plan into action by starting to run off in the opposite direction to Sue! Rob quickly darted in and out

of trees but Death was in hot pursuit and getting closer all the time!
Rob knew that time was running out for him , he couldn't keep up this pace for much longer. He was going to have to think of something and think of something fast! Suddenly he came to a large clearing, with Death hot on his heels there was no way that he would be able to cross it before it caught up with him!

Sue was also tiring badly as she ran through the woods looking behind her while constantly panting heavily. Suddenly she stopped uncertain of which way to go and looked around her frantically in all directions.
"Oh God which way is it? Which way?"
Following the easiest trail she scrambled along it stumbling numerous times over bush branches and stones but each time picking herself up and driving herself on. Finally miraculously she at last found the bush that she was looking for.
" Thank God!" she uttered sincerely.
She immediately hid by it trying not to cut herself on its thorns while hoping and praying that Rob would be there at any moment.

Death soon arrived at the clearing that it had seen Rob run towards- only to find it deserted and so continued on. Not long afterwards Rob emerged from under a pile of branches or leaves that he had covered himself with! He immediately got up cautiously and started running to where Sue would be hiding or at least to where he hoped she would be hiding!

Meanwhile Death continued on its solitary hunt knowing that sooner rather later its prey would cross its path again.

Sue was hiding nervously by the bush when suddenly she heard a faint shuffling which grew louder by the second.
"Oh Hell! What now?" she grimaced.
The shuffling kept on getting louder and louder with Sue getting more and more frantic and wondering where it was coming from.
"Rob? Is that you Rob?"
Suddenly the shuffling started to fade till it faded into a distant whisper. Sue let out a long sigh.
"Oh Rob where the hell are yer?"she sighed.
Suddenly Rob stumbled into her hiding place- BADLY WOUNDED!

"Oh No !Rob! ROB!" she cried out as she saw Rob's deep throat gash wound .
"It almost worked Sue it almost worked! I thought that I'd got away but it was just waiting for me . Its waiting for you Sue its waiting for you now!" Rob managed to force out of his mouth before the rising tide of blood washed the words away and with them his life.
"NOOO!" Sue screamed out causing her to wake up.
Sue sat bolt upright relieved that Rob's death had just been a nightmare but she was horrified to realise that it was a nightmare that might come true!
"ROB WHERE ARE YER?"
Rob heard her cry and looked frantically for her through the darkness, finally his eyes found her WITH DEATH BEHIND HER WITH ITS SCYTHE RAISED!!
"SUE ITS BEHIND YOU RUN!" he bellowed out.
Sue twisted round saw the scythe and threw herself out of harms

way as the scythe came thundering down to where she had been sitting a split second before. Without looking behind her she ran straight into Rob's welcoming arms it was only then that they both dared to look back at the bush only see Death facing them yet again!
"We're back to square one what the hell do we do now?" wailed Sue.
"Run like hell- right now!"
"I can't! I just can't!"
"You have to! We both have to!"
" I wish I was dead!"
" DON'T SAY THAT ! Don't even think it! We're not gonna die here, not now! Not ever!"
"Are you damn well blind can't you see that we're trapped here in this living hell?"
"Only till dawn- so keep moving and keep alive!" demanded Rob who then took Sue forcibly by the hand and towed her deeper into the woods they hadn't gone 5 yards when they suddenly stopped dead in their tracks.
"I don't believe it!" Sue exclaimed in amazement.
In front of them loomed an old decrepit isolated house!
"Believe it! We're saved come on!" chimed a jubilant Rob.
Sue allowed herself a hopeful smile, a smile that was quickly replaced by a look of terror that spread across her face as she looked back.
"God help us Rob! Its right behind us!"
Rob glanced round as well to see Death just a short distance behind them!
"DON'T LOOK AT IT SUE JUST RUN!"
They both broke out into a sprint towards the house but in their

haste Sue stumbled banging her leg heavily on some stony ground .
"AAAHHHH! MY LEG!" she cried out in pain.
Rob immediately helped her up.
"Lean on me!"
Sue needed no prompting and hobbled painfully next to him. The front door was almost within arms reach.
Rob looked back, Death was also in arms reach of them.!
Finally they half- fell half walked to the door and both began pounding furiously on it.
"OPEN THE DOOR PLEASE! OPEN THE DOOR!" shouted Rob.
"HELP US ! HELP US! SOMEONE OPEN THIS DOOR PLEASE RIGHT NOW!" begged Sue.
But no one came. Rob tried to break it down but the door still held firm. Meanwhile Death was almost in striking distance again. If Death could breath , Rob was sure that he would have felt its breath on the back of his neck.
"WE GOTTA TRY THE BACK!" ordered Rob as he started to drag Sue round.
"THERE'S GOTTA BE A KEY ROUND HERE SOMEWHERE!" argued Sue
"WE'VE GOT NO MORE TIME LEFT! LET'S GO!" demanded Rob and without listening to anymore of Sue's futile ideas Rob pulled her round to the back of the house.

They managed to get to the backdoor but with no time to spare Rob barged into the rotten door which was thankfully unlocked and they both fell onto the floor in an untidy heap. Rob immediately got up slammed the door and locked it.

"SUE OVER HERE!" he yelled frantically.
Sue limped back over to the door as quickly as she could.
"Keep your weight against it I'm gonna barricade the door!"
"HURRY UP I'M NOT THAT DAMN HEAVY!"
Rob would have found that comment funny any time but now! He looked around and quickly grabbed a chair and jammed it against the backdoor handle.
"OK relax!"
Sue needed no further encouragement and flopped helplessly down. Next Rob lifted up a table, wedged that up against the door and surveyed the makeshift barricade.
"Do yer think that will hold it back ?" he asked.
Sue only had enough energy to shake her head despondently but Rob was in complete agreement with her judgement!
"I know! So why the hell hasn't it busted through it already?"
"I know as much about this weird crap that we're in as you do!"
"Maybe it can't force its way in ! Maybe it has to be let in!"
"Well at least there's no chance of that!"
Rob didn't answer. He knew that Sue wouldn't have liked the answer.
"Is there?" questioned Sue.
"I gotta check that the doors and windows are shut and locked - quickly".
Rob raced off quickly to carry out his checks.
"Keep an eye on the back door if anything happens then shout!" he called back to her.
"Don't worry I'll scream my head off!"
Rob quickly checked that the front door was locked, he then quickly went to all the windows making sure that they were also secure.

He suddenly saw a window ajar and ran to it quickly then out of the dark Death appeared by it!
"OH GOD!!"
Luckily he managed to shut it just in time and drew the curtain, after staring at it fearfully for a second he ran upstairs quickly shutting and locking all the windows he could find .
He ran back downstairs to Sue who was staring attentively at the back door and looked round, startled by his sudden appearance.
"We're sealed up as tight as we're gonna be!"
"Did you see anything?"
"Its still out there -waiting!"
"For what?"
"For us !"
"We're dead!"
"Not as long as it stays outside! Look let's check this place from top to bottom, there could be a phone, a CB radio even a fax machine -anything that we can use to get help from the police!"
"Even if we do whose gonna believe us? Come and help us please 'cos The Grim Reaper's outside the house. They'll send an ambulance to take us to a damn funny farm!"
"I don't care who they send as long as they send someone!"
"Even if someone manages to get here what the hell can they do to help us against that thing!"
"Giving us a ride out of here is the only thing they can do!"
"What about that damn thing out there!"
"What about it ? What can anyone do about it!? How do you kill something that's already dead , and whose only purpose is to cause death?"
" I don't know!"
"You can't! You have to destroy it!"

" How the hell are we supposed to do that?"
 "I don't know may be we won't even have to try when the dawn comes it might send it back to wherever it came from!"
"How long till dawn !"
Rob looked at his wrist to look at his watch but it is wasn't there!
"Damn it. I've lost my watch! What's the time?"
"Mine's gone as well. We could be 5 hours away -we could be 10 hours away. I've lost all track of time!"
"We've gotta search this house right now! How's your leg feeling?"
"Good!"
"Good enough to walk on?"
"Yeah I think so!"
"OK I'll do a thorough search upstairs. Try and check the rooms on the ground floor if you can OK?"
Sue nodded .
"Are you sure you're gonna be OK?"
"I'm sure"
"You know that I love you don't you?"
"I know"
"We're gonna get through this both of us together!"
"I know we will!"
They hugged and kiss.
"I won't be long"
"Yeah ! Don't you dare be!"
They smiled at each other briefly before starting their imperative tasks. Rob went upstairs and started to check one of the rooms thoroughly- under the bed, then behind it , in each of the drawers and then behind it!
Suddenly he felt something and found to shock and amazement a

samurai sword, 2 Beretta pistols and a colt 45 along with numerous ammo clips and bullets! He suddenly remembered the rumours of drug dealers and other criminals using the woods on occasions as a hideout or perhaps someone had just stashed them there for safekeeping. The reason for them being there didn't matter , all that mattered was that they were there and that they could be used!

Meanwhile Sue started to check the living room thoroughly, she looked behind the settee under the cushions. She looked in one of the chairs then saw a cord leading from it ! She rushed excitedly to it and removed the cushion. There was a phone underneath!
"Rob I've found a phone!"
Rob stopped what he was doing and came out of the room.
"What?"
"I SAID THAT I FOUND A PHONE! "
"Good job baby I'll be right down!"
Rob jumped down the stairs excitedly.
Suddenly the phone started ringing.
Sue hesitantly picked the receiver up and put it to her ears just as Rob entered the room.
"Who is it?"
A look of shock and dismay grew on Sue's face as she listened in horror to what she was hearing.
"What is it?"
Sue grew even more shocked
"NOOOO!" she cried out.
Rob rushed over to her just as she threw the phone down.
"WHO WAS IT ?"
Rob picked up the phone but it was dead, he looks at the cord it

was frayed at the end! It hadn't even been plugged in! Sue saw this and collapsed in terror. Rob immediately rushed over to her side to comfort her,
"Who was it Sue? Who was it?"
"It was Ros and Tom. They were screaming in pain and crying out for mercy"
Sue started to become more and more hysterical.
"THEY WERE SCREAMING IN PAIN AND CRYING OUT FOR MERCY JUST THE WAY WE WILL BE WHEN IT GETS IN HERE ! JUST THE WAY THAT WE 'LL BE SCREAMING!"
"LISTEN TO ME THAT WON'T HAPPEN WE'RE SAFE IN HERE ! THAT WON'T HAPPEN OK ? OK?"
Sue started to calm down and nodded slowly. She suddenly saw the samurai sword, guns and ammunition that Rob has brought down .
"Where the hell did all that come from?"
"I found it all upstairs. "
"What good will they do us?"
"Well it can 't do us any harm can it?"
"Are sure that the guns even work?"
"I'm gonna check 'em now!"
Rob checked the barrels of each of the pistol and their firing pin mechanisms.
"They look in good working order to me!"
He checked the barrel of the other pistol and the firing pin mechanism
"That looks good as well! Let's hope that the bullets aren't blanks!" he said as he started to load the guns.
Rob had found 2 gun harnesses with the guns and he immediately put them on.

He slotted a Beretta gun into each harness then slung the samurai sword over his shoulder.
"You better take one of these!" he said as he offered her the colt 45.
"I don't know the first thing about guns!" she protested.
"Don't worry I'll give you a crash course!!" reassured Rob.
A heavy pounding interrupted their conversation.
"Oh God help us! Where's it coming from Rob?"
"The backdoor- come on!"
They arrived in the kitchen to find the backdoor being pounded on!
"Its gonna break it down!" Sue cried.
"We gotta stop it! Come on push!"
They both threw themselves against the door and the barricades in a vain effort to stop the door from being forced open but it was of little use and the door started to vibrant and buckle under the bombardment of blows that it was having to endure.
"Its no use Rob!"
"Push harder come on harder! Harder!"
"I can't!"
Sue looked on in horror as she saw the door start to give away.
"Its getting through! Its getting through we gotta run!"
"Run where ? We've got nowhere else to run!" he shouted as he pushed against the door even harder.
"C'mon we can do it! Keep pushing!" he begged her. "YOU'RE NOT GONNA BEAT US! YER HEAR YOU'RE NOT GONNA BEAT US!" Rob yelled out defiantly.
Just then without warning the pounding seemed to abate and get less and less hard.
"Thank God! Its giving up!"

They both leant against the door gasping for breath.
"We beat it! I knew we-" Rob began confidently only to be interrupted by a heavy pounding on the front door.
"Oh please God No!" Sue despaired.
"Front door! Let's go!"
They both rushed to the front door but when they got there they could hear that the knocking had got a lot harder and that door was on the verge of giving away.
"We're too late its not gonna hold!" cried out Sue.
"We've gotta try before its-
The door was at that moment flung open and Death came charging into the house.
"GET BACK! GET BACK!" Rob yelled at Sue.
"WHERE THE HELL TO?"
"We've gotta get back to the other door!"
"BUT IF THERE'S SOMETHING OUT THERE WE'LL BE TRAPPED!"
"At least we'll have a chance which is more than we've got right now!"
Sue stared in stark terror as Death careered towards them while Rob calmly took out his guns aimed and waited till he had it at point blank range
"COME AND GET IT!"
Rob started to blaze away relentlessly with both guns till they were empty but although Death staggered back it started to advance again -naturally unharmed!

They ran quickly to the backdoor and froze in shock as the door crashed open to find that Death was now there and was now crashing through the barricades towards them!

"GET DOWN!" Rob ordered Sue.
Rob aimed his guns again at it and began firing repeatedly at it, once again it staggered back but soon recovered and began advancing again.
"WHAT NOW?"
"THIS WAY!" he said as he pushed Sue in the direction of the cellar
"GET TO THE BASEMENT FAST!"
"WHAT ABOUT YOU?"
"DON'T WORRY I'LL MEET YOU THERE NOW GET GOING!"
Sue ran off towards the cellar while Rob started to fire away at the monster in an attempt to slow it down, as it staggered back he rushed after Sue towards the cellar.

Rob flung the cellar door open rushed in then quickly bolted the door shot before running towards Sue who he embraced tightly.
" I was scared to death!-Don't ever leave me again!"she pleaded.
"Its OK! Its OK!"
"Don't lie to me I can take the truth -we're trapped in here aren't we?"
Rob hesitated then nodded while Sue started to cry.
"Its gonna find us eventually isn't it?"
"Yes it will!"
"And when it does it'll will kill us!"
"Yes it has to!"
"Why us ? Why me?- and why did yer have to be so damn truthful with me?"
Rob shook his head exasperated and half smiling, the women in his life invariably seemed to ask one thing yet want something

else!
" Look we're still alive and while we're still alive then there's still hope!"
"HOPE ? WHAT DAMN HOPE? You said it yourself its gonna find us then kill us!"

"Not if we get out before it does find us! We've still got a little time before it looks in here, let's use the time to escape!"
"How?"
"We've got somethings on our side!
"Such as?"
"Such as the cellar window! We can escape through there! "
"What's the use?It'll will chase us!"
"We've got a chance of loosing it in the woods"
"How the hell do we do that?"
"We'll use the darkness and trees to hide from it!
"This is all bullcrap it-"
"We gotta go now! We won't get a second chance!"
He quickly pulled her to the window which he opened carefully and slowly.
" I'll go first!" Rob bravely offered.
"Be my guest!"
Rob slowly pushed the window open and emerged outside the house with one of his guns drawn around him he could see nothing except darkness and trees. Sue quickly followed him out and they both ran out into the night.

They continued to run and run till they could run no more and had to rest to catch their breath.
"I can't believe we're still alive Rob !"

"Well we are! So let's keep it that way and keep moving!"
They moved on a little further this time at a more leisurely pace until Rob thought he heard something.
"What was that?"
"What?"
"Someone's behind us!"
"Oh God!"
"Stay still don't make a sound!"
They both listened carefully.
"I didn't hear anything!"
"The breaking of branches being trodden on suddenly shattered the silence.
"There's someone out there"
"C'mon we gotta go Rob!"
"Wait!"
"Are yer crazy its getting nearer!"
It could be coming from any direction we gotta find out from where or we could be running straight into it. So be quiet and LISTEN!"
Suddenly something barged pass him knocking him over. Rob could see that it was just a young girl!
They both ran after her and managed to grab her while she screamed in terror and tried to break free!
"Its OK! Its OK! We're not gonna hurt yer! WE'RE NOT GONNA HURT YER! "Rob pleaded with her which started to calm the young girl down . Rob could see that she was in her teens but her body looked painfully thin, she wore a soiled pink dress and her complexion was unnaturally pale while her black hair looked unwashed and matted.
"What's your name? Where do you live?" Rob questioned her

gently
The girl was silent.
"Its alright we're not gonna hurt yer ! Can you help us? We're lost!" he asked sincerely.
"Do you know the way out of here?" chimed Sue in her nicest and gentlest voice.
The girl nodded her head and taking Rob's hand led him along into the woods.
"Where do yer think she's taking us?" Sue whispered
"Hopefully out of this hell!" Rob replied hopefully as their mysterious guide led them into the woods
"How much further is it?" Rob asked her after a little while.
The girl either didn't hear the question or didn't wish to answer it.
Rob moved closer to the girl and repeated it more slowly.
"How much further?"
The girl smiled let go of the Rob's hand and ran on ahead beckoning them to follow.
"Where are you going?" Rob called after her.
The girl leaned her head and and pretended that she was asleep.
Rob looked at Sue excitedly."She's taking us to where she sleeps- to her home!"
The girl rushed away again and they both scrambled after her through some bushes and trees.

They came through the foliage and out into a clearing, but when they got there, there was no sign of her!
"Where the hell is she?" asked Rob bewildered.
Rob and Sue turned round and were shocked by what they saw- Two wooden crosses firmly embedded in the ground. The girl had led them to a GRAVEYARD!

"What the hell's going on Rob? What does this mean?"
"It means that the girl we were talking to is DEAD!"
"NO! There's gotta be another explanation!
"There is no other explanation! This is her home. This is where she sleeps -in death!"
"But why the hell did she lead us here?"
"This has gotta be a trap! We gotta go back NOW!"
Suddenly without warning the girl jumped in front of them as they turned to go back and bared her teeth at them and showed them her fangs! She was a vampire!
"RUN!!" Rob shouted to Sue.
The girl immediately attacked Rob who tried to throw her off. Sue immediately tried to help but found herself being flung through the air and on to the ground where she hit one of the crosses knocking herself unconscious
Meanwhile the female vampire and Rob were rolling around in the dirt furiously with her fangs getting closer to his neck and snapping inches away from his throat .
"SUE! HELP!!!!" he pleaded.
But Sue was still unconscious. Rob tried to reach back for one of the wooden crosses but failed, he tried again but failed again! He had to try again , he had to grab that cross!! Then at last his fingers just managed to grasp round it but the vampire's fangs were now brushing against his skin!

Suddenly the vampire felt a spine shattering pain that shook her whole system causing her to wince back in agony! Rob threw her off, the cross having stabbed her through her dead black heart and staggered over to Sue to try and wake her up.
"SUE! SUE!"

She at last began to come round at last while moaning in pain. Rob started to lift her up but was struck on the head from behind by another vampire! This time a male who then took the stake out of the girl vampire bringing her back to life! Now that she was no longer destroyed she rose up and both she and her companion approached Rob and Sue. Sue was awake now and saw that it was now Rob who was knocked out!
"ROB!!!!!" she cried out to him but it was no use.
Each of the vampires lunged at them, the girl at Rob and the man at Sue. Sue saw them charging and without hesitation ran off screaming into the woods with the male vampire chasing her. Meanwhile the female vampire moved eagerly to her unconscious prey. It had been a long time since she had fed and the unconscious meal lying on the ground would do just fine!

Rob lay helplessly oblivious to the fate that was unfolding around him and getting fatally closer to him steadily. The female vampire girl lurched over him ready to make the kill and bared her teeth ready for the final lunge. She could almost feel his jugular vein pounding away, all that delicious thick blood for her to drink. As she lowered her fangs to his skin, the thought strayed across her depraved mind about how strange it was for an unconscious man to have such a strong and fast heartbeat unless- she never got time finish that thought she only had time to scream in pain and die as Rob flipped himself over and spiked her with the wooden stake that had just been pulled out of her. This time he drove the cross straight through her heart and out of her back, while all the time ignoring her screams and the sickening squelching noise as the stake burrowed deep into the decaying organ. Soon her screams and convulsions had ceased and her impaled body lay lifeless on

the ground.

Rob could hear Sue's screams from somewhere in the woods, he had to find her! And soon! Her screams gave him hope though as they told him that she was still alive!

Sue could feel her legs start to buckle under her and realised that they could not support her body or the punishing pace that she was putting them through. Finally the inevitable happened and her legs turned to jelly and crumbled beneath her like a decaying foundation sending her crashing to the ground. She looked away and closed her eyes hoping that her end would be quick and painless but knowing inside that only the opposite would be true! Suddenly she felt rain falling on her dress- warm rain. She dared to open her eyes, surely the vampire should have caught and killed her by now? What she saw was salvation! Rob stood over her his hand extended to help her up. At his feet lay the vanquished vampire its tortured soul released at last. She looked at her dress and saw that it had been splattered with blood that had been the 'rain' that she had felt.
"C'mon babe we gotta go-there could be others!" pleaded Rob as he anxiously glanced around at the prison bar- like trees. Sue gratefully took his hand and they both embraced, thankful for one another.
"Are you alright?" Rob asked concerned.
"We're being stalked by Death! Two of my friends have been murdered. I've been attacked by a vampire! I'm cold and hungry of course I'm not damn well alright! Would you be?"
"Look on the bright side!"
"What damn bright side?"

"The bright side that says that things couldn't get any worse!"
Sue shook her head incredulous of Rob's ill-timed wit while staring at him
"So which way do we go Mr always look on the bright side!"
"Let's try this way!" he ventured motioning with his head in the direction that he proposed.

From a far Sue and Rob suddenly heard their names called and looked at each other stunned, each knew those distant voices so well!
"That's Ros and Tom!" exclaimed Sue.
"How? They're dead!"
"How do you know? We never found their bodies, only 2 hearts that could have taken from some pigs!"
She turned away from Rob overjoyed that her friends were alive.
"ROS! TOM! WHERE ARE YER?"
"Wait! How can you we be so sure its them?"
"Its got to be them who else could it damn well be?"
Sue shrugged off Rob's pessimism and continued shouting for them.
"ROS! TOM! WHERE ARE YER?"
"LOOK! OVER THERE! " cried out Rob.
Rob pointed over to a tree a fair distance away, but he was still able to pick out two people that certainly seemed to resemble their missing camping colleagues who were now waving and calling out to them.
"WE 'RE ALRIGHT !" shouted out Tom.
"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO YOU BOTH! WE THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD!" Rob shouted back
"WHAT?"asked an astounded Tom.

" WE'RE COMING OVER TO YER!" yelled out Sue.
She turned triumphantly to Rob.
"You see of course its them!"
"WE FOUND A WAY OUT COME ON!" Ros bellowed
"OK! OK! WAIT FOR US!" hollowed out Sue
But Rob stood hesitantly still .
"What's the matter?" grilled Sue.
"Everything and nothing!"
"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"
"Maybe something's wrong and maybe it isn't ! I just don't like the look of this !"
"Stop talking crap and come on!"
Sue turned towards Tom and Ros who were now fast disappearing from view.
"HEY WAIT FOR US WILL YER!"
"COME ON!" cajoled Tom.
Rob and Sue started running after them in an effort to catch them up.
"SLOW DOWN WILL YER!" Sue complained bitterly to them, but their response was to move away even more quickly as Rob and Sue neared them!
"HURRY UP!" called out Tom impatiently.
"HANG ON!" boomed Rob who just managed to glimpse Ros and Tom as they turned into some trees and disappeared from sight.
"WE'RE GONNA LOOSE THEM AT THIS RATE!" panicked Ros.
They followed them frantically through the trees to at last find Tom and Ros with their backs turned to them.
"WHAT THE HELL'S YOUR PROBLEM?? DIDN'T YER HEAR US SHOUTING??"

Tom and Ros turned around but they both had bloody wounds on their chests and their faces looked drained of all blood!
"WE'RE DEAD THAT'S THE PROBLEM!" grimaced Tom.
"SOON YOU'LL BE DEAD AS WELL!" Ros joined in gleefully, who then started to cackle uncontrollably with blood coming out of her mouth . Tom also started to join in the cackling with blood also dripping from his mouth.
Sue stood petrified screaming incessantly and Rob had to drag her away forcibly.
"RUN!" he demanded.

As they escaped Sue turned round once more to see that they were gone!
"WHERE THEY GO?"
"DON'T TALK JUST RUN!"
They sprinted back the way that they came on and on till they saw in the near distance a group of tents.
"Look!" cried out Ros excited .
"It must be the main camp that we were trying to find!" Rob extolled jubilantly.
They both ran towards the camp with high hopes, surely there was someone there who would believe
them , and more importantly help them. But when they got there they at last realised how alone they really were. Sue would have cried had she had any tears left to shed while Rob simply stared in disbelief that anything like this could happen on God's earth.

Strewn across the site like carelessly discarded pieces of rubbish were dismembered body parts, fingers arms, legs and torsos that looked half devoured ,mixed in with heads of males , females and

even children. Sue knelt down amongst the human carnage and bowed her head too shocked to do anything except rock back and forth and murmur to herself over and over again "Why? Why? Why?"

Rob knew that they would have to leave this place as soon as possible, it was a place of death not hope. But before they left he at least owed it to these poor souls to check if anyone had survived this massacre. He quickly started to check the tents but only found body after body of ordinary people whose only mistake was to have spent a holiday out here in this hell bound forest. Rob paused to look at one of the torsos more closely , it looked half eaten, whatever had done that was something that he only wanted to meet in his worse nightmares, not here in reality in some dark forest.!

He went over to Sue taking care not to tread on any of the human body parts , he thought that he could at least afford them that much respect. Putting his hand gently on her shoulder he whispered "We can't stay here!"
Sue nodded and put one of her hands over his. "I know -I'll be alright just give me a minute please." her voice shook with grief and despair.
An unearthly howl interrupted them. Sue looked up startled a questioning look on her pale face.
"It sounded like a wolf -but there aren't supposed to be any here!" panicked Sue.
"Just like there aren't supposed to be any vampires or grim reapers" remarked Rob dryly.
The howling started again this time not one but a whole pack in a

half-human half -animal eerie chorus.
"Have you still got that Colt 45 I gave you?"
Sue nodded "But I don't-"
"Just aim and squeeze the trigger. The safeties off! "
Rob didn't get time to give any more instructions as soon as he saw the dark form of what looked like huge black dogs with fiery red torches for eyes. But as soon as they neared them, they stood up on their hind legs!
Sue immediately got up and clung to Rob.
"What are they?"
"Werewolves! Damn Werewolves!"
"How do we destroy 'em?"
"We don't! We've got no holy water or silver bullets. If we can't destroy them then we can at least hold them back. Now watch my back. I'll take care of these ones in front!"
The creatures in front of Rob charged head face into his blistering line of fire. Bits of flesh spun off their dark haired bodies and the air became filled with their howls of pain as Rob's firepower found its mark, driving the foe into a disorganised retreat.

A second pack tried to sneak up on them from behind at the same time but Sue was ready and waiting! Grimacing in anticipation of the noise and recoil that she was going to experience she took aim at the nearest of the werewolves and squeezed the trigger slowly. There was a loud crack followed by a howl of pain and the dull sound of splintering bone. The creature fled taken by surprise by these armed humans! This was easier than she had dared hope for- even the recoil hadn't been all that bad, at least she was still standing in her 2 feet! She fired repeated at the murderous night monsters till soon they were all in retreat and disappeared into the

sanctuary of the darkness.

"They'll be back soon!" Rob warned as he busily reloaded, " How much ammo have you got?"
"Plenty"
"Good ! Make sure that you're reloaded OK?"
"OK"
Sue noticed something out of the corner of her eye, and swung round to see some movement inside one of the tents.
"Rob look! The tent! Someone's alive!"
Amazed Rob raced to the tent and flung it open what he saw was almost beyond belief. There had been movement from one of the campers alright, but whether the person was alive was another matter altogether!"

The person that was staring at him had an eyeball ripped out and half his skull missing with his brain exposed for anyone to see! This person was as dead as a person could be and he should have remained dead. Something had brought it back to live and made it into a living dead zombie!

Rob immediately pulled himself just as the dead camper made a grab for him. He tumbled out of the tent realising that what was happening in that tent could be happening in others! He yelled out to warn Sue to watch out just as other living dead zombies emerged from their tents with Sue looking about bewildered.
"Shoot 'em! Shoot 'em!" he yelled.

This Sue did but still they kept on lumbering towards her, putrid flesh dripping from their rotten outstretched fingers.

"IN THE HEAD! IN THE HEAD!" Rob ordered as he took aim and quickly shot at the ones lurching over to her sending then flying to the ground then spun round and blasted the one he had seen in the tent at point blank range in the head, shattering the other half of its skull.
Rob joined Sue and they both made their way round to each of the tents shooting anything that moved in the brain as soon as it poked its head out. Everything seemed to be coming under control- till the howling started again!
"They're gonna be attacking any second , we gotta go! Come on!" urged Rob.
Sue nodded frightened and they both fled into the night.

They came to a graveyard and halted. Behind them they could hear the howl of wolves and the clumsy heaviness of the living dead as they formed an unholy alliance intent on their destruction.
"We've got no choice , its gonna take too long for us to go round. We've gotta go through!" Taking each others hand they dashed through it pass the statues , the headstones till suddenly they stopped as 2 huge headstones ripped out of the ground in front of them. On them were their own names ROB and SUE RIP!!!
"OH GOD NO! NO!" a panic-stricken Sue yelled out.
"COME ON DON'T LOOK AT IT COME ON!" shouted Rob.
"WE GOTTA KEEP MOVING!"

Suddenly creatures resembling demons started springing out of the ground all around them grabbing at Sue's and Rob's feet. Rob managed to jump up and avoid a sideswipe made by one of these snarling horned monsters. Sue wasn't so lucky and screamed as one of the emerging demons got hold of her leg and gripped it

tighter and tighter till Rob pressed one of his Berettas against the scaly skin covering its wrist and pumped out 4 shots into it amputating the limb from this fiend and leaving it crying out in pain and for vengeance, its useless limb immediately fell uselessly to the ground allowing Sue to escape from its murderous grasp and continue her dash to freedom with Rob!

But they were now not the only ones running! The demons having now fully emerged from the earth also gave chase to them their hoofs shaking the earth as they stomped after them!

"We gotta get to the church!" panted Rob as a its dark silhouette emerged in front of them.
"My leg! Let me rest it for a second I can't go on! I just can't!" whined Sue.
"If I can so can you now come on!" Rob ordered while he pulled her along even more forcefully.

The church door was now almost within their reach , he just hoped to God that it wasn't locked but as soon as he reached it and pushed it the door creaked opened slightly! Rob sent a silent thanks to God for answering his prayer! Though the door was unlocked the hinges were rusty and both the combined force from both Sue and him were needed before it started to yield and creaked open a few more inches.

The evil chantings and mutterings of the demonic hordes could be heard behind them and were getting louder and louder. The door had still only shifted about 12 inches, there was no time to shift it anymore and Rob roughly pushed Sue through the narrow gap

despite her protest about it being too small. With her safely through he quickly followed and then shoved the door shut, bolting it.
"It won't take long for them to get through!" Sue lamented desperately.
"Let's look around and see if there's anything that we can use!" instructed Rob.

Their search didn't take long. The church had long been abandoned and stripped of its sacraments and fittings. It was now just a hollow shell.
"Nothing ! No crosses , no holy water nothing!" a frustrated Rob remonstrated.
"Well at least we're safe here aren't we?" Sue asked intently.
"For the time being yes! "
"NOOOOOOOO!"came a loud voice consisting of the evil hordes from outside followed by evil cackling.
"Don't listen to it! just don't-"
A shattering window caught their attention followed by another and another.
"Oh God help us!" pleaded Sue out loud.
"Let's hope he does no one else can!" retorted Rob.

They could see tops of the demon's horns as they gathered by the windows waiting to attack in force. All at once they sprang up to the windows , but Rob and Sue were ready , organised and determined and any demon trying to gain entry was soon felled by a hail of bullets. Next this demonic horde started to pound away at the walls smashing away large chunks of masonry just large enough for them to be seen so that they could harass their captors

and force them out. But Rob and Sue were staying put and backed into the middle of the room, ready to defend themselves to the last bullet.
"I'm running low on ammo Rob. I'm down to my last 10 rounds. How about you?" lamented Sue.
"I know! So am I!" replied Rob equally worried "I've only got 2 spare clips left!"
Rob suddenly looked excited and turned to Sue. "Trust me Sue I've got an idea-when they come to the windows don't fire at them! "
"But that's suicide-"
"Just trust me I've got a plan! "
Some more demons jumped onto the window ledges and leapt into the church. Sue raised her gun to fire but Rob stopped her.
"Rob please -" begged Sue.
"Trust me and trust God!" replied Rob calmly.
Sue needn't have worried the approaching demons got no further than a few paces before dissolving into liquid flesh as their condemned flesh were now on holy ground, the others at the windows seeing what had become of part of their horde retreated quickly. Rob and Sue smiled at each other and hugged they really were safe here. Unfortunately it wasn't going to be for long! For a moment later a sudden rumbling erupted causing the floor to quake and shake throwing them both off-balance.

"WHAT THE HELL'S HAPPENING?" cried out Sue as tried to hold onto Rob who was asking himself exactly the same question! He looked about dumfounded as the walls started to bend in and out like pieces of paper in the wind. The whole structure felt that it was coming apart from its foundations! A terrible thought came

to him in an instance and he pulled himself up to one of the broken windows and peered cautiously over the edge . THEY WERE MOVING! In an instance Rob realised what the evil hordes were trying to do. They were moving them away from the consecrated ground to where the demons would have no obstacle in getting in .He and Sue had to get out NOW!.
"WE GOTTA GO THEY'RE MOVING THE CHURCH!" he yelled to Sue
"THEY'RE WHAT???" She replied refusing to believe what he had just told him.
Rob didn't wait for her to finish the question and had immediately sprang up to a window to see if they could jump through it. A swipe from one of the demons with its lethal claws told him otherwise.
"THIS WAY!" he barked at Sue as he pulled her to the cellar! All around them pillars crashed down narrowly missing them shattering the floor and exploding into fragments. They managed to avoid yet another crumbling pillar and finally got to the cellar door one hard push from Rob sent the door flying.
Quickly they clambered down the shaking and crumbling staircase just as it collapsed into a mountain of grey rubble.

Above them the sounds of destruction reverberated unabated sounds that would soon find their way to them.
"WHERE NOW?" screamed Sue.
Rob's eyes worked furiously through the semi-gloom trying to pick a way out.
"OVER HERE" he cried out hopefully as he raced to a pile of timbers slung carelessly against one of the walls and proceeded to kick them aside. Sue joined him and together they both burrowed

deep into the rotten wood throwing the timbers about anyway not caring where , just as long as they were out of their way. For several tense seconds no one spoke as they threw the timbers aside not daring to think that there would be nothing underneath it all. At last timbers were kicked aside to reveal….NOTHING! Just another part of untouched wall.
"No.." wept Sue pitifully as she sank to the floor sobbing. Rob felt like giving up as well, they were trapped with no way out but something inside willed him on! To lay down now would be to surely die. In frustration he kicked the wall angrily but instead of a few stone fragments coming off it, his foot went right through it! The wall was hollow!
"SUE LOOK!"
Sue raised her sullen red face from her hands and gasped.
"Come on baby!" he urged her gently, pulling her to her feet as she took his hand, holding it almost bone-breakingly tight to his own.
The hole looked just large for them to squeeze through one at a time , or at least it had better be Rob mused to himself there was no time to make the hole any bigger , the hellish sounds above reminded him of that.

Sue stood for a moment trying to decide if it was larger than her already narrow waist. If this had not been such a life and death situation Rob might have rolled his eyes and made some joke about only a woman would be guilty of such a thing at such an inopportune moment. But this was a life and death situation and there was no time for such ribaldry!

"DON'T LOOK AT IT! GET THROUGH IT BABE!"

"BUT WHAT IF IT ISN'T-"
"IT WILL BE! NOW COME ON!"
Not waiting for her to continue the argument he pulled her down towards the gap.
Sue let out a yelp of surprise and protest, she tried to pull back but her puny feminine arms were no match for Rob's strength and before she could put up any real resistance, Rob had shoved her roughly head first into the makeshift escape hole.
"ROB!" Sue was more angry than surprised.
"DON'T SHOUT AT ME ! GET A HOLD OF SOMETHING AND PULL YOURSELF THROUGH!"
"I CAN'T I'M STUCK!"

Sue found herself stuck half-way through and was understandably terrified -the top half of her body was stuck in this dark place, from what little light which was managing to filter through the hole which Rob had made she could see it was some sort of narrow passage. Meanwhile the bottom half of her body waved about forlornly like a stranded fish in the church cellar.
"YOU CAN DO IT BABY!YOU CAN DO IT!" Rob's heart felt cut in two .This had been the one thing that he had hoped against hope wouldn't happen.
"NO I CAN'T ! I DAMN WELL CAN'T!"
"Sorry about this babe " murmured Rob a little embarrassed at what he had to do , he always behaved like a gentleman with Sue and always took it upon himself to ask before touching or enacting any sort of foreplay. There was no time for such niceties now. Gripping her supple buttocks tightly he pushed with all his might .
"ROB! WHAT THE HELL DO-" Sue didn't get to finish as she went flying through the hole like a bullet and ended up in a heap

with a mouthful of dust in her lungs which she started to promptly cough and splutter out!

The sound of the demons were at the cellar door now , above him Rob could see the whole ceiling shifting and contorting, it would inevitably collapse at any moment revealing their escape route and THEMSELVES!
"COME ON ROB COME ON!! "this time it was Sue's turn to urge Rob on.

Rob's walking boots pounded away relentlessly at the hole , he just needed a few more inches , centimetres , millimetres just enough to get him through with ease but progress was slow, deadly slow! He had got lucky with the part of the wall that he had originally kicked in , that had been soft and decaying but the rest had stood the test of time and was unyielding .Rob knew that in a few more seconds it would be all over for one or both of them.
"RUN!" he yelled through the gap "I'LL CATCH YOU UP LATER!" he added being more hopeful than truthful!
"IF YOU STAY THEN I'M STAYING!" Sue replied defiantly.
Looking all around. Rob spied behind him some sort of thick rope tied to the cracking rafters directly in front of the man-made gap , if it could just hold his weight for a few seconds…. Rushing headlong into it he grabbed it and pulled it back as far as he dared. He wasn't going to be even more foolish and do a tug on it to test its strength, whether it collapsed braking his neck , or whether the demons broke in and tore him limb for limb ,one thing was clear staying here any longer meant death . Gripping the rope firmly he took a deep breath as if preparing for a 100m

sprint., moved back as far as the length of rope would allow then sprang forward in the race of his life.

When he was 30 ft away from the hall he launched himself off the floor clinging resolutely to the rope and pointed his two legs in front of him like a battering ram as the momentum built up in the rope's swing sent him flying towards the hole.

At 5 ft away he had just enough time to yell a quick warning to Sue "GET CLEAR! I'M COMING THROUGH!"
Rob let out a long yell and closed his eyes just as his boots made high-speed contact with the ancient brick wall. He felt rubble and dust collide with his face stinging it a thousand times. Finally he came to an abrupt halt and dared to open his eyes to that of a squint, but darkness was all that seeped through.
"ROB ARE YOU OK?"
Rob opened his eyes wider to see where he was, he felt giddy and the urge to vomit but shook his head to try and rattle his senses back to normal while forcing the ascending vomit back down into his stomach.
"I'm fine now lets-" an almighty crash interrupted him as it seemed that the whole world had caved in on top of them, in this case they knew it was only the ceiling roof but with it came the terrors of the night hot on the scent of their human warm-blooded prey, enraged that they had been cheated for so long of the pleasure of destroying these 2 mortals!

The collapsing roof had worked to Rob and Sue's advantage and blocked up the now much larger hole! But it wouldn't hold them back for long and would only give them a minute's head-start if

they were very lucky , most probably only a few seconds if they were to be honest with themselves!
They picked themselves up and started feeling their way frustratingly slowly down the winding rough-edged passage. The air tasted cold and stale as if it too was as old as the rock that the ancient passage had been hewed out of. They didn't speak as they breathlessly pursued the exit of this winding hole, there was no need or time for words each knew the struggle with death that they were entrenched in. The sound of splintering wood and breaking rubble echoed past them and reminded them of how desperate their escape was becoming.
Finally after gingerly rounding a corner they could see a single thin shaft of light shining like a beacon guiding them towards the exit and life while behind them the inhuman shrieks and screams of evil came closer and louder.

Their flight suddenly came to an abrupt halt! They had reached the end of the tunnel and the end of the line for both of them if they didn't do something fast! The light came from between 2 slabs of rock above them, finding a ledge Rob climbed up towards the slabs to try and make the crack lager but they were wedged too heavily together to budge.

"HURRY ROB THEY'RE COMING! THEY'RE COMING" she pleaded.

Rob needed no such reminder but still managed to keep his cool as his cracked and bleeding fingernails still struggled to get some hold in the small crack. Then at last his fingers found a nook which he wedged his fingers in as far as they would go. He then

heaved , heaved with all his might and for his life. His efforts were rewarded with the sound of stone grinding on stone- IT WAS MOVING! The shaft of light widened into a beam to reveal the light's source -the moon. The stone slabs continued to shift but the sound was rapidly drowned out by the banshee horde careering towards them, soon they would be trapped with the only escape death! Rob made one more supreme effort which sent a mini landslide of stone slabs falling out the other side giving them a big enough space to escape through-hopefully!

"LET'S GO" he told Sue as he offered his hand to help her up which she grabbed like the lifeline that it was . It was then that their pursuers finally caught up with them and attacked. A demon raced forward with snapping claws hungry for Sues 's dangling legs . Rob immediately took slow and careful aim in the dimness not intending to waste any ammo and squeezed off a shot. The bullet caught it clean in the centre of its forehead and sent it down writhing with death spasms another one was hot on its trail which Rob despatched in a similar fashion. He didn't wait for any more to find them and quickly helped Sue up through the gap next he levered himself outside to a grassy clearing to join Sue.
"WE GOTTA GO!" pleaded Sue tugging at Rob's shirt.
"IN A SEC!" he assured her. Suddenly a demon reared its evil head through the hole. Taking out the samurai sword strapped to his back with one swift swipe Rob decapitated it sending its head rolling along the grassy ground. They didn't wait for another one to appear and ran towards the haven of the nearby forest with the evil hordes hot on their heels. Rob could see their outlines partly camouflaged by the night and smell their hellish stench as they closed in around them from all sides but he wasted no time and

ploughed into them hacking, mutilating and decapitating away at anything grotesque that moved within range of his samurai sword which carved a flesh-strewn path that would take them to the sanctuary of the woods.

Finally they made it to the woods and up ahead through the tangled net of branches they caught the glimpse of a wall a window .. and then a door!
"THEY'RE GAINING ON US!" cried out Sue.
"OVER THERE TO THAT BUILDING!" ordered Rob.
"HELP US! HELP-"Sue stopped in mid-sentence and instead stopped running and started to cry. Rob didn't need to look twice to see why- IT WAS THE SAME HOUSE that they had just left! They had gone round in a circle and were no closer to getting out of this waking nightmare than before. Despair shooting through them with every step that they took, they lumbered exhausted to the house stumbling through the open front door shutting it behind them. But it couldn't be locked due to the previous assaults.
"DAMN! WE GOTTA BARRACADE IT-"but even as Rob said it the door came crashing down towards them! Rob rolled out of the way dragging Sue with him and found themselves confronted with more demons!
"GET TO THE BACK!" Rob yelled frantically as Sue stood transfixed to the spot with only her mouth moving in an attempt to scream.
"GET DOWN!" Rob instantly pushed Sue to the ground and unsheathing his bloody samurai sword swung round in a tight circular motion decapitating any hapless creature's head that happened to be within the blade's reach.

Rob turned to see more of the demons approaching them through the backdoor as well, the stairs was their only escape. Clambering up the bare staircase with Sue, Rob kept his eye warily on the hellish spawn ,the sword in one hand the gun in another as the remaining demons followed them.

"BEHIND YOU!" warned Sue. Rob turned just in time to see the claw swipe aimed at his throat, he instinctively jerked back quickly to avoid the fatal wound but not quickly enough to avoid it causing a deep gash to his hand making him drop the sword. Rob repaid the monster for its trouble with interest and blew a hole at point blank range in its forehead sending brains and blood shooting out all over the walls.

"YOUR HAND!" shouted Sue as she saw the blood dripping from the deep wound .
"DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT JUST GET THE SWORD!" urged Rob, Sue reluctantly obliged and picked it up.
"IN THERE!" Rob motioned to an open bedroom.
They bundled into the room and after slamming and bolting shut the door behind them started to look for anything to barricade the door .
"THE BED SUE!" ordered Rob, together they quickly jammed it up against the door just as the hammering started against it .They put their weight against their pathetic barricade and looked at each other , each knowing that the end for both of them could be near.
"Rob-" began Sue tearfully.
"Its not over for us ! DO YER HEAR ME? How much ammo do yer have?" interrupted Rob.
"Nothing! I've got nothing! How about you?"

Rob took out one of his guns.
"Empty! "Rob threw it away resignedly, took out another gun and checked it. A slight smile formed on his face "2" he stated bluntly.
"Just enough for you and me!" Sue reflected aloud.
"Put that out of your mind that isn't gonna happen!" he replied sternly while staring at her unflinchingly.
Sue looked down at Rob's hand and was immediately horrified by the state of it.
"Your hand!"
"Don't worry about it. Its just a cut!"
"Hold still!" scolded Sue as she tore off some bed linen and started to bandage it tightly while all the time trying to keep her mind of the persistent banging going on behind them.
"How's that ? Not bad eh?" she announced with feigned pride.
"Yeah ! Thanks" Rob replied gratefully
Out of the blue Sue let out an ear piercing scream , pointing frantically at the wardrobe Rob looked up to see a demon lumber out of it and immediately fired it sending it flying, but simultaneously behind them the lock broke and their meagre barricade was cast to one side as if it was a feather in the wind!
Sue immediately rushed to Rob's side who had swung round to the door ready to face what hell might throw at them next. Gripping his side tightly she whispered in his ear.
"Kill me Rob please do it now! I'm a coward I don't want to die slowly. I don't want to be like Tom or Ros!"
"You won't I promise we gonna survive! We will survive!
Rob looked up to see a demon at the door, without thinking he fired a shot into its heads sending it back to hell.
Another demon appeared at the doorway , Rob raised his gun and squeezed the trigger, the gun clicked uselessly, he squeezed again

, again the despairing sound of the empty gun struck him again.
"OUT THE WINDOW! QUICK!" he shouted as he hurled the empty gun at the hordes.
Sue was way ahead of him and was already struggling with the window lock.
"IT WON'T DAMN WELL BUDGE!" she despaired.
Rob was there in a flash and with one firm twist unlocked the window and flung it open.
"JUMP!" he commanded as he bundled her out.
"IT'S TOO HIGH!" she whined as she climbed onto the window ledge.
Rob turned just in time to see one of the demon's within striking distance and ready to slash out.
"DO IT NOW! THEY'RE RIGHT BEHIND US!"

Without thinking he threw himself out of the window dragging Sue with him pulling them both to their unknown fate in the pitch blackness below. Everything flew past in a blur as they flew down to the ground. Rob could hear the wind as it whistled past them which was almost drowned out by Sue's screams, screams of panic, of anger, of hopelessness knowing that there was no way that she could change the outcome of this- it had already been decided. Sue's grip loosened and Rob realised that she must be going into merciful faint, death would at least be painless to her, but he still held on doggedly to her hand determined that if they died it would be at least be hand in hand with the one he loved. He started to see his life start too flash by before his eyes his birth his-
"OOWWW!" he yelled out as pain erupted in his shoulder as it made contact with something , not the ground something not so

solid yet hollow at the same time. A similar cry of pain came from Sue who obviously had landed on the same thing.
They both bounced and fell a few more feet this time it was definitely the hard ground that they hit, they quickly picked themselves up and looked at their silent saviour- a large thick hedge had broken their fall and saved their lives- at least for the next few moments!

"You Ok?" asked Rob breathlessly, amazed that he had any breath to get back!
Sue nodded back equally amazed. "I think so!"
"Let's get going before they find us then!"
"Go where ? We're trapped! This whole damn forest is a prison!"
"Listen! May be it is a prison keeping us in, but it can't keep the sunlight out! Nothing can! That will drive the darkness away and the evil with it! Now come on we only have to last a little bit longer"

From the surrounding darkness came unearthly noises not of this world that abruptly reminded them of the ever-present threat of death that they were facing.
"GO!" Rob yelled as he shoved Sue forward.
They both fled into the woods desperately trying to loose themselves in the trees and bushes till they could go no further and fell in a heap under an ancient oak tree which would be there long after the evil abominations of this wood had devoured them and perhaps be the only witness to their last moments.
Sue crept closer to Rob. "Its dark Rob its so dark!"
"It won't be for long! It can't be!"
"Surely it should be light by now!"

"Soon! Soon! Hang on babe!"
"OH GOD HELP US ! HELP US! HELP US!" wailed Sue
Rob wanted to yell out as well but his self-control stopped him instead he prayed silently and intensely. But throughout the forest Sue's wail echoed for everyone and everything to hear.
It acted as a siren bringing all the beasts from hell to diverge on that sound knowing that their prey was now within easy grasp. Zombies, vampires , demons, and werewolves leapt, ran shuffled to this sound of human suffering and misery.

Rob scanned the sky hopefully looking for any glimmer of hope in the form of light. Was it his imagination or was the darkness in the east starting to loose some of its blackness and becoming lighter in colour?

"Can't you see anything yet?" Sue interrogated him impatiently.
"I'm not sure"
"Its gotta be daylight soon , its just gotta be!"
"Soon ! It must be soon!" Rob murmured to himself.
"What's that?" Sue demanded startled as she heard the gradual crescendo of evil approaching them.
"COME ON!" Rob shouted urgently as he grabbed her hand
"Where are we going?"
"To a place that I remember seeing on the map ! You don't wanna know where! Just trust me!"
They got up and started running again but not far behind them hellish sounds assaulted their ears, sounds of growls, insane laughter and howls which were getting closer to them by the second, but their escape was halted abruptly when they came to a barbed-wire fence.

"We gotta get through this!" demanded Rob
"THROUGH TO WHAT?" screeched Sue
"Don't worry where just get through it! " he ordered angrily as he held one of the rows of barbed-wire away from the ground with a rotten branch.
"Slide under it NOW!-But once you're under it stay close to the fence! Don't go any further! GOT IT?"
"WHY THE HELL-?"
"DON'T ASK WHY JUST DO IT OK?"
Sue was too distracted by the bone-chilling screaming that seemed to be going on all around them to argue and wriggling herself sideways she inched her lithe body under the rusty metal needles.

Her leg carelessly caught one of the barbs and she cried out as the metal raked along her skin.
"Careful babe! Are you OK?" an alarmed Rob asked as he quickly lifted up the wire from her .
"I'm OK! Honest its just a scratch." Sue feigned bravely as she tried to control the urge to whimper as she slid the few remaining inches to freedom, freedom to nurse her bleeding leg and stand up.
It was Rob's turn next, he took a deep breath and started to slide under the metal thorny wire, soon he was through and standing next to Sue.
"Where are we?" Sue asked mystified.
"In a minefield!"
"Oh God help us we're dead! WE'RE DEAD!"
Sue started to thrash about hysterically , Rob could see the even deeper peril that she was placing herself in and immediately pinned her down .
"We're gonna get through this! We're gonna get through this!" he

repeated in an attempt to reassure her as well as himself. The escape plan that his mind had spawned, had seemed dangerous but workable at its birth, but right now given their location it seemed more reckless and stupid by the second!

Sue had stopped moving now and instead quietly sobbed into the muddy earth.
"I'm gonna get off you now! Don't move OK?" he whispered sternly , her sobbing silence gave him her consent.

Rob slowly eased himself off her, careful not to roll onto any earth that he hadn't already been on. He then took out his gold penknife that Sue had bought him for Christmas, flicked out the bright shiny silver blade and hoped to God that it was going to be long enough for the purpose that he had in mind for it.
"Sue!" He hissed , but Sue lay limp on the ground, lost to the world, lost to Rob and lost to herself.
"Sue!" Rob hissed again, Sue at last lifted her tear-streaked face as beautiful and fragile looking as ever, but Rob could see a new strength and determination in her eyes, a kind of resolve that he hadn't seen before.
"I'm gonna check ahead for mines stay behind me and follow the path I take! Don't stray off it by an inch! OK?"
"OK" whispered Sue back in an unsurprisingly subdued manner.
Rob acknowledged her answer with a quick nod and slid the blade slowly into the earth diagonally, his heart almost shuddered to a halt as the blade touched on something hard, he swallowed hard and dared to push the penknife harder causing the blade to stab through this unknown harmless obstacle so allowing it to continue its descent into the dark until it was buried in the mud up to its

hilt. Rob withdrew the blade quickly and repeated this painstaking mine location process 5 times more before crawling forward a few inches. Rob knew instantly as he edged forward that this was taking too long! The unearthly inhuman wails and screams were building into an awesome crescendo, it was as if the bowels of hells had vomited up its guts all over the forest bringing with it all the terrors that it held.

"ROB HURRY!" shouted an alarmed Sue as the noise of this frenzied bizarre mob reached fever pitch.
"I know!" he muttered as he worked away furiously.
They had cleared 2 more feet, when the thought struck him if this minefield might had been cleared when it had been abandoned by the government as a mine testing field years ago.

As if in answer to his question the penknife blade struck something, something hard -SOMETHING METAL! Rob kept the tide of panic rising in his mind in check and started to dig around this mysterious object carefully brushing the clods of dirt away as if it was some rare archaeological find. He could see the detonation sensor wires on it now, whether it was real or not didn't matter at this moment in time as far as Rob was concerned it was real enough for him! Marking it with a small nearby stick. He started to shift away from it.
"I've marked a mine with a stick! Keep following me!" he barked at Sue.

"We're not gonna make it across in time .We're going to slowly they gonna-"
"We don't need to make it across! We're safe here" he cut her

short.
"What the hell do you mean ?"

"What I mean is that we're in the middle of a minefield! They wouldn't dare follow us in here!"
" But we're still too close to the edge!"
"I know- so just do as I say and let me get on with clearing a path! OK?"
Sue's reply was a long scream, Rob turned round startled and immediately wished that he hadn't! Along the whole length of the barbed wire as far as he could see in the gloom shapeless forms with hellfire red fiery eyes staring at them greedily in silence. Although they were in the minefield, Rob didn't rule out the fact that they might try a suicide strike. Even now he could see the werewolves with their hind legs hunched ready to strike as if they were going to leap over the fencing and directly onto them. They had to get further into the minefield. NOW!
He knew that what he was about to do was likely to get them killed but at least it offered a slim chance of survival as opposed to no chance of survival if they stayed where they were.

He turned to Sue who looked at him with questioning look in her eyes. "There's only one thing for it we've gotta make a dash for it!"
Sue could only stare at him petrified.
"No! No!" she whispered hoarsely "We can't!"
"We've got to do it and we've gotta do it together!" he insisted desperately knowing that they had just moments left, before the hunger for their souls drove these beasts to do something reckless in order to devour them.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw something move quickly, he didn't look to see what it was but he could make a pretty good guess.
"Sue! Above you! " He cried out . Sue looked up instinctively to see a huge dark form falling to her with claws outstretched ! Just as she looked up Rob seized her by the shoulders and forcefully dragged her screaming out of the thing's way, that was more than enough impetus for Sue who scrambled to her feet and began running with Rob through the minefield, just as the werewolf landed heavily on the ground setting off a mine that had been near to Sue and exploded into bloody pieces. Rob and Sue heard the explosion but were too concerned with saving themselves to care. As they ran Rob didn't dare look down knowing that even if he did see a mine by the time he saw it, it would be too late to avoid it, better that death took them quickly than to see it coming.

Sue squawked in surprise and pain as she stumbled and fell into a ditch taking Rob with her.
Rob viewed the approaching ground of the ditch with increasing horror as he fell towards it, wondering what deadly secrets it concealed! They both fell down heavily to the damp ground with a heavy bruising thump but neither of them was complaining- they were still alive!

Rob looked back to see the way that they had come and saw that at least they were now a comfortable distance from the evil hordes. It was a situation that didn't last for long, something that Rob found out when he gazed almost casually upwards to be met with an horrific sight - all the beasts were FLOATING towards

them as if on some invisible conveyor belt like some nightmarish army. A nightmare army with Death floating ahead of it like some leader!

"DO SOMETHING!" pleaded Sue shaking Rob who seemed hypnotised with shock at the sight of this mammoth horde sweeping across a cloudy sea on unseen chariots.
He turned to Sue and looked blankly as if to say that there was nothing he could do!
And what could he do? There was nothing that he could use to physically destroy them -EXCEPT BY USING
THE LAND MINES!
"WE GOTTA FIND A LANDMINE!" he yelled at her.
"WHAT?" queried Sue.
Rob searched frantically in the moonlit darkness for any signs of one, if he was right then one was all that he would need! He at last found one and his fingers dug furiously around to free it from the earth.
Although Sue wasn't sure as to what he was up to she helped as best as she could and dug away as if she was insane.
"Stay back!" Rob warned her as he carefully lifted up the discus shaped mine -the perfect shaped for the purpose that he had in mind for it.
"What's the plan ? What are we doing?" bombarded Sue.
"Stay down this could get messy!" was the only information he gave her.

Rob guessed that this army of death was only about 50 m away and closing fast. It was advancing at an altitude of about 50m. He knew that the puny landmine that he held wouldn't destroy them

all. But his single target was well within range and that was Death itself!
He hadn't thrown a discus since high school but as soon as he gripped it , all the old throwing technique came back to him . He knew what he had to do and he knew that he could do it. He just prayed to God that he would do it! Taking a deep breath he spun round quickly and launched the circular missile into the air sending it spinning precariously towards it target (hopefully!)
As Rob and Sue tried to be brave and watched the path of the Land mine intently , they knew that they were watching their fate being decided. This was their final attempt at survival, after this it would be over for either them or their enemies.

Death saw the spinning object flying towards it and made no attempt to avoid it, knowing that it could do it no harm and met it head on. A small brief intense flare lit up in the sky and then died falling down to the earth. Death was still there , still intact but the army faltered and came to an almost standstill.

A second later it began to rain heavily.

It rained werewolves, vampires , zombies and demons , each crashing onto the minefield and exploding into pieces of putrid flesh. Finally Death itself fell and disappeared in a fireball of mine explosions.

Sue got up and stood next to Rob and surveyed the unfolding carnage in disbelief. Rob smiled satisfied that he had been proved right . Death had used some sort of telekinetic power to lift these creatures into the air. The explosion from the mine had destroyed

its concentration sending them all crashing to the earth and into the deadly minefield!

Sue and Rob hugged and kissed spontaneously whooping with delight, but then something unbelievable happened that cut their joy short- the smouldering pieces of mutilated flesh started to roll towards each other as if they were magnets attracted to each other, at first they didn't notice but as this strange resurrection gained momentum and speed the terrible truth showed itself- the creatures were coming together again , but not in their original form, they were ALL coming together as ONE to form ONE massive unknown creature

Rob and Sue watched transfixed in horror unable to speak or move only able to stare as they watched the creature assembled from the bottom up. Finally the last piece of flesh fell into place and solved this macabre jigsaw puzzle. The creature was a giant form of DEATH!
It stomped nearer to them while Rob and Sue clung desperately to each other knowing that there was nowhere else for them to run or hide. But just as the creature got ready for their destruction it felt something scorching on its back, turned round and saw the first light of the morning dawn SUN! It immediately felt its form dissolving into mush and watched as its own arms dropped and melted into the ground....

Rob and Sue watched in amazement as the last remnants of the creature soaked into the earth not destroyed but at least for the time being defeated, a few wisps from its ashes the only evidence that it had ever been.

Too tired to speak they picked their way through the minefield jumping from crater to crater where the mines had been set off. They were finally back in the woods, still lost and hungry but at least alive…….. at least until the night!

EPILOGUE

James closed the book physically and mentally exhausted. The sun had set long ago and the stars had now come out to play twinkling mischievously . He turned to look back at the macabre stone human effigy but it had gone. Although strangely, James could see a solitary figure disappearing into the distance dressed and even looking like himself. He shouted out to him but nothing came out except a strange gargle. His mouth was dry he tried to wet the inside of it with his tongue. He couldn't - HE HAD NO TONGUE!

He let out a long scream then looked at his clothing , he was wearing the same clothes as the stranger! He suddenly knew what had happened he didn't how he knew , he just knew as if some secret knowledge had been imparted to him. The stranger had taken his place , that had been the price of reading the book, now it was his turn to wander the Badlands till he met someone, someone for him to become . James cried shamelessly at the life that he had just lost.

THE END